Investigating the Topic Area Focus of PhD TEFL Dissertations at AAUGS

Rabab A. Mizher
English Language and Literature Department
Balqa Applied University, Jordan

Oqlah M. Smadi
Faculty of Education, Yarmouk University
Jordan

Abstract:
This paper aimed at exploring the standing of TEFL research in Jordan in terms of topic area of PhD dissertations awarded by Amman Arab University for Graduate Studies (AAUGS). The researchers scrutinized the topic area of all TEFL dissertations of AAUGS from 2003 till 2010 (82 dissertations) regarding their compliance with the technological, cultural, academic, pedagogical variables and challenges of the 21st Century. More precisely, the questions of the study were: 1) What are the major topic areas of Jordanian TEFL dissertations, considering Amman Arab University for Graduate Studies as an example? 2) What topic areas of TEFL dissertations at Amman Arab University for Graduate Studies are: over researched, satisfactorily researched, neglected areas or need more research? Is there is any statistically significant differences at $\alpha = 0.01$ due to topic area? To answer these questions the researchers scanned almost all AAUGS PhD dissertations from 2003 till 2010 for the title and the abstract to be able to define the topic area. The findings of the study revealed that the focal point of most TEFL dissertations is on reading as an over-researched area and on writing (a separate and integrated skill) as satisfactorily researched areas while others considered either neglected or poorly researched areas. .
Key Words: English proficiency, Higher Education in Jordan, TEFL Dissertations at AAUGS.

Introduction

Current status of English as an International Language (EIL), feasibility of the outcomes, the roles of culture and technology along with other factors underscore the pressing need for a dynamic teaching methodology. It should consider the aforementioned variables in addition to others such as students' level, interests and affective needs, learning styles, contextuality and authenticity of input, fluency and accuracy of output …. etc. However, such a viable methodology ought to be based on a solid and dynamic ground. This superficial contradiction of the solid and dynamic nature of the intended ground of teaching English methodology fades away by incorporating all standards, principles, hypotheses and guidelines of TEFL to pave the way for a strategic teaching and learning of English so as to empower the teaching practices inside the classroom.

To a certain extent, it could be stated that there is no single theory or teaching method upon which the 21st century's EFL is based on due to the huge number of variables. Consequently; insights and implications are elicited from research findings in areas of language acquisition, TEFL, personal teaching experiences, and implications resulting from students' achievements. These insights and implications are collected and casted in a feasible shape of hypotheses, principles, standards, guidelines. etc which keeps updating and altering to match the demands of the post-method era in TEFL(Figure1).
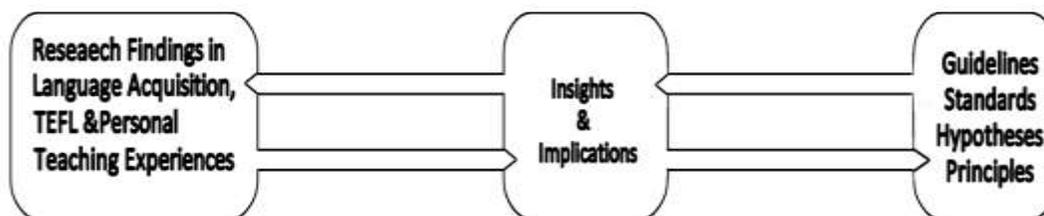

Figure 1: The continuous altering of guidelines, standards, hypotheses, principles.etc according to the up-to-date research findings

These guidelines, standards, hypotheses and principles are manifested in the American Council on the Teaching of the Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines (APGs), Standards of Foreign Language Learning (5Cs), Brown's Principles of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning (Brown's Principles) (Brown 2001), & Omaggio's Five Hypotheses of Learning and Teaching (Omaggio's Hypotheses) (Omaggio, 2001). They collectively reflect the challenges of 21st century and set the scene for proficiency-oriented teaching and learning approach. Teaching includes all the variables pertaining to the teacher and curriculum; learning embraces all variables related to the learner.

ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (APGs) are issued by The American Council on Teaching a Foreign Language to "define and measure language ability in speaking, listening, reading and writing" (Omaggio, 2001:12) and are classified into superior, advanced, intermediate, and novice levels. Each of these levels is classified into sub-levels of low, med and high. Thus they help to determine students' levels, upon which teachers draw up outcomes and activities to contextualize and achieve these outcomes. Omaggio (2001:12) reveals that "[l]evels of proficiency on the ACTFL (Proficiency Guidelines) scale can be distinguished by considering the four interrelated assessment criteria underlying the proficiency descriptions: global tasks/functions, context/content, accuracy and text type''.

Standards for Foreign Language Learning empower students with universal concepts to consolidate their 2nd or foreign language learning so as to communicate proficiently. They are "standards for foreign language education to outline the content of instruction and are arranged into five major goal areas; Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons and Communities" (5Cs) (Omaggio,2001:36). Communication Standard consists of three levels, while each of the other standards consists of two levels. Each level is subdivided into three levels; Grade 4, Grade 8 and Grade 12. Communication Standard highlights the significance of learning English in order to communicate properly in real life situations. Cultural elements are integrated into students' curriculum in various forms to raise sensitivity to the other culture which will facilitate teaching-learning processes and thus communication. The Connections Standard underlines the vital role of language in learning other disciplines. The Comparisons Standard assists learning by making students continually compare their language and culture to the other language and culture. Finally, Communities Standard empowers learners to use language in multilingual communities inside classroom and around the world. Upon preliminary considering of the APGs and the 5Cs, it could be said that the APGs are the skeleton for teaching and learning process whereas the 5Cs are the flesh of such skeleton.

Omaggio's five working hypotheses along with their corollaries are developed by Alice Omaggio Hadley to help in designing English language teaching and learning practices that foster learners' proficiency in all skills at various situations inside and outside the classroom. They are published in her book "Teaching Language in Context" in 2001(p.90-91). These hypotheses are dynamic in the sense that they enhance proficiency-oriented instructions which are subjected to a large number of variables; the notion that will lead to bolster learners' communicative competence. The first hypothesis highlights contextual and authentic input and early opportunities for learners to express their own meaning through active interaction among students which encourages creative language use. The second hypothesis emphasizes practice through functions and tasks. The third hypothesis is related to accuracy, precise use of language and use of evaluative feedback. The fourth hypothesis is concerned with affective and cognitive needs of learners and significance of considering learning styles. Finally the fifth hypothesis underlines the students' sensitivity to other cultures and communities.

Brown (2001:54) states that "a great number of teachers' choices are grounded on established principles of language learning and teaching." These principles are derived from research to function as rudiments upon which actual teaching practices inside the classroom are relied. They are classified into three major areas of cognitive, affective and linguistic principles which will be respectively illustrated. Automaticity principle stresses the automatic and subconscious production of language for effective communication. Meaningful learning principle promotes long-term retention of meaningful input. The third cognitive principle is the anticipation of reward which means that the learner knows that whatever s/he learns will be rewarded, accordingly, it will be part of the learner's cognitive structure. The well-established intrinsic motivation in the learner facilitates and accelerates learning as the learner needs, wants and desires are fulfilled. Strategic investment is the last cognitive principle that boosts strategic teaching and learning; the teacher should develop strategies and should be as well be acquainted with his learners' learning strategies to teach accordingly; i.e. promotes effective learning strategies and eliminates the ineffective strategies.

The affective principle is related to the learner, it includes: language ego, self-confidence, risk-taking and language-culture connection. Sometimes, first language ego is highlighted in the learner's mind which will hinder foreign language learning. Teacher ought to use strategies to

bridge the gap between first language and foreign language learning. Teacher needs to design activities to bolster Learners' self-confidence by challenging the learner to take risks and be rewarded accordingly. The last principle in the affective domain is the inseparable relation between culture and language as teacher is supposed to compare and contrast the cultural elements in both languages whenever they rise.

The Linguistic principles are the native language effect, inter-language and communicative competence. The learner's first language may affect learning positively by highlighting similar elements between the two languages or negatively through interference to compensate for communication gap. The inter-language principle is associated with stages of learning; every level has its own features that demand appropriate feedback. As

> the communicative competence is the goal of a language classroom, instruction needs to point towards all its components: organizational, pragmatic, strategic and psychomotor. Communicative goals are the best achieved by giving the attention to language use and not just usage, to fluency and not just accuracy, to authentic language and contexts, and to students eventual need to apply classroom learning to previously unrehearsed contexts in the real world (Brown,2001:69)

It is apparent that Figure 1 constituents are interrelated and they complement each other. The deficiency in any of them is compensated in another. Nevertheless, there are some elements that are underscored in all of them; cultural component, for example, is explicitly reinforced in the 5Cs, Brown's Principles and Omaggio's Hypotheses while implicitly stated in the APGs. Moreover, the learner's domain is deeply implanted in all of the components both covertly and overtly; the philosophy of ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the Standards of Foreign Language learning totally depend on the final achievement of the learners by stressing their level and the needs for the teacher to design appropriate activities to the level per skill (APGs) and per concept (5Cs). On the other hand, Brown's Principles and Omaggio's Hypotheses overtly underline affective needs; the third, fourth, sixth, seventh and eighth principles in Brown (2001) and the fourth hypothesis in Omaggio are in congruence in this respect. The contextualization of the input is promoted in the second criterion of APGs and the first hypothesis in Omaggio, whereas meaningful learning and communicative competence principles on one hand, and communications and communities standards on the other hand mirror contextualization of the input.

As for language use, functions and tasks, they are apparently promoted in APGs first criterion and in Omaggio's second hypothesis along with third hypothesis that demands accuracy. The first principle in Brown (2001) is automaticity which fosters the automatic processing of unlimited number of language forms (Brown, 2001). Authenticity of the input is stated clearly in the fourth corollary of the Omaggio's first hypothesis, the last principle of communicative competence and finally in the advanced and superior levels of APGs. Fluency and accuracy of the output are stressed in the communicative competence twelfth principle, in criteria and advanced and superior levels of APGs, in the third hypothesis and the twelfth levels of the 5Cs. Creativity is highlighted in the third corollary of the first hypothesis, superior levels of APGs, twelfth levels of the 5Cs. Eventually, strategic learning is enhanced in the fifth principle of strategic investment and under the umbrella of communicative interaction in Omaggio's hypotheses, the communication standard in 5Cs and all levels of APGs.

Literature Review

Upon considering Figure 1, undoubtedly EFL research is the cornerstone of developing students' English proficiency provided that it is steered on right direction to reach its destination, i.e. the students' classrooms; then, it takes feedback from real classrooms to the researcher's desk. Consequently, such TEFL research life circle ought to be survived if researchers benefited from what could be called "collective research" or "overall research" as to be acquainted with the state of the art of research in general and TEFL research in particular. Unfortunately, these studies are very rare; the researchers of the current could hardly find related literature of EFL/TEFL research evaluation in Jordan.

Maani (1990) evaluated ESP/EFL/ESL research in the 1980s with special reference to Jordanian context. At that time, he stated that the "purpose of [his] study was to make an attempt to investigate this important, but apparently neglected area in ESP/EFL/ESL program research….namely the thesis/dissertation"(p.viii). In order to find out how ESP fits this kind of research, the researcher analyzed 90 dissertations written by Jordanian researchers from 1980 – 1989 in terms of their topic areas focus. The four major categories of investigation were linguistics, psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics and language pedagogy. Maani's question related to language pedagogy included 12 areas: "1. Artificial Intelligence / Language Computer Models. 2. Classroom-Centered Research. 3. Curriculum / Course / Syllabus Design / Administration / Evaluation: Syllabus & Materials. 4. Distance / Off-Campus Learning. 5. ESP / ESP & Content-Based Syllabuses. 6. Language & Technology (Computers, Videos, Audios, etc.). 7. Materials Analysis / Productions/ Evaluation: Materials and Syllabuses. 8. Methodology / Research Methodology/ Methods & Materials. 9. Profession / Professional Standards & Concerns. 10. Teacher Preparation / Training; Observation & Evaluation. 11. Teaching Aids (Cartoons, Posters, Flash Cards, etc.). 12. Testing" (1990:71)

Among the findings, Maani (1990) concluded that "Jordanian researchers have avoided certain areas, especially in the fourth category, language pedagogy…[particularly] dissertation writers seemed to avoid certain topic areas because they considered them difficult topics" (p.113) such as course and syllabus design. Although his study is not directly connected with the focus area of the current study, it is considered among the early and almost solely research dissertation that focuses on research evaluation as a means to improve teaching and learning process in Jordanian context.

Alptekin & Tatar (2011) investigated foreign language teaching and learning research in Turkey (2005 – 2009). They qualitatively studied the most common and frequent interests of academics and practitioners in foreign language teaching and learning from three major sources: local professional journals, conference proceedings and papers and Ph.D. dissertations. The interests of Turkish researchers in foreign language teaching and learning are classified into seven major categories; namely, "foreign language teaching and teachers, foreign language learning and learners, foreign language teacher education, listening and speaking, reading and writing, measurement and evaluation and finally language and culture" (p.331). The researchers concluded that practical research has dominance among Turkish researchers with focus on learning and teaching.

Although Maani (1990) and Alptekin and Tatar (2011) were the only studies that have connection with the current research (to the best knowledge of researchers), the scope of their studies is rather comprehensive when compared with the current study. Such limited approach could be attributed to the lack of a national database for research, in general, and for TEFL

research, in particular, in Jordan. Even with visiting the libraries of universities or departments that issue TEFL dissertations, researchers can get nothing but to go the shelves.

Statement of the Problem

EFL learners' proficiency is a day dream as confirmed by almost all scholars who investigated the arena of English as a foreign language in Jordan. The obsession of mastering English is transmitted from parents to their children starting from pre-school stage to university regardless of the learner's specialization. At this point, research in EFL ought to gain a prominent emphasis in order to understand the reasons that make English proficiency lags behind. Hundreds of higher education dissertations and theses along with journals articles have been issued in the last decades and the onset of the new millennium with a major aim that is to improve students' proficiency in English. However, their broader goal is not fully achieved due to many reasons including the lack to what could be called "overall studies" or "evaluative studies" of research topic area. Except for Maani (1990) study and to the best knowledge of the researchers, almost no studies have been conducted on evaluation of EFL research in Jordan. Consequently, the current study aims at answering the following questions:

Questions of the Study

➢ What are the major topic areas of Jordanian TEFL dissertations, considering Amman Arab University for Graduate Studies as an example?
➢ What topic areas of TEFL dissertations at Amman Arab University for Graduate Studies are: over researched, satisfactorily researched, neglected areas or need more research? Is there is any statistically significant differences at $\alpha = 0.01$ due to topic area?

Significance of the Study

Upon highlighting the viable role of research in upgrading the students' proficiency in English, upon considering Maani (1990) study which focused on ESP/EFL/ESL research that made reference to Jordanian context in the 1980s and to the best knowledge of the researchers, the present study is among the early studies which aimed to evaluate the state of the art of EFL research in Jordan through focusing on TEFL dissertations. The impact of the state of the art studies is observed on the philosophy of education, educational policy makers, curriculum designers, teachers, learners and researchers.

Limitation of the Study

Due to the scarce studies conducted on the status quo of TEFL research in Jordan, this study tackles Ph.D. dissertations issued by Amman Arab University for Graduate Studies from 2003 to 2010 as a representation of other TEFL departments at the Jordanian universities since most of the supervisors are from different public and private universities in Jordan. Consequently, generalization of the results could be – to a certain extent- restricted to AAUG.

Moreover, the scope of TEFL dissertations covers English proficiency at both schools and universities for two reasons. Firstly, English proficiency differences among schools are wide and could be attributable to various factors; public vs private in favor of private schools, city vs village in favor of schools in cities…etc. Secondly, English proficiency at universities is not necessarily to be advanced. Freahat (2012) compared between the level of difficulty of reading passages at secondary schools and language center at Yarmouk University to find out that school passages are more difficult and advanced.

Method and Procedures

In this study, the researchers scanned almost all AAUGS dissertations from 2003 till 2010 for the title and the abstract to be able to define the topic area. Access to these dissertations was made possible by two ways: 1) Reviewing all AAUGS dissertations' abstracts directory (Jaradat & Khawaldeh, 2007) that contains all dissertations titles along with their abstracts awarded by the university from 1999 – 2005. However, the researchers focused on TEFL dissertations. 2) Going directly to the shelves where dissertations of higher education of four faculties (Educational Studies, Financial and Administrative Studies, Law Studies and Computer Studies) are placed. Again, the researchers focused on TEFL dissertations. In order to define the topic area and answer the questions of the study, the researchers followed the following stages:
1. Compiling titles along with their abstracts.
2. Identifying the topic area from the title then checking it with the abstract.
3. Preliminary identification of topic area was tested for validity. To obtain inter and intra reliability of the identification of topic area, the researchers asked two TEFL PhD holders to match the title of the dissertation and its topic area in order to measure their consistency for inter-reliability As for intra-reliability, the researchers, themselves, identified the consistency of the title of the dissertation and its topic area twice keeping a period of one month between the first and the second identification. The intra and inter-rater consistency of the identification yielded acceptable percentages: 99.8 and 98.7 respectively.

Findings and Discussion Related to the First Question

To answer the first question which is "What are the major topic areas of Jordanian TEFL dissertations, considering Amman Arab University for Graduate Studies as an example?" the researchers examined the titles and abstracts of AAUGS TEFL dissertations. Identification of topic areas of AAUGS TEFL dissertation included the following categories:
A: Skills:
    1. Reading
    2. Writing
    3. Listening
    4. Speaking
B: Integrated Skills
    1. Reading and Writing
    2. Speaking and writing
    3. Reading and vocabulary
    4. All Skills
C: Learning Styles
D: Vocabulary
E: Grammar and Functions
F: English for Specific Purposes
G: Teacher Development
H: Culture
I: Teaching Translation
J: Teaching Literature

It is obvious that the scope of the topic area of dissertations is wide and covers almost most of the cultural, technological and pedagogical challenges. Assessment and evaluation are approached within categories like skills, vocabulary, grammar and functions.etc. Skills are

approached in separate and integrative manner. Classification discrepancies between Maani (1990) and the current research could be attributed to more than 20 years of research development in language pedagogy. The elements of culture, learning styles, teaching translation and teaching literatures did not overtly appear in Maani's study.

Moreover, it would be permissible to conclude that the focus on culture, context, and learning styles are reflected in the 5Cs, APGS, Omaggio's Hypotheses, Brown's Principles and Communicative Approach. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is an eclectic and flexible approach (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) and (Brown, 2001) that considers authentic and meaningful communication, contextuality, fluency, accuracy, creativity of input along with sociolinguistic, pragmatic and communicative competence. Other factors such as autonomous learning and learning styles are also major features of CLT. Alptekin and Tatar (2011) classification of TEFL dissertations' topic area is rather comprehensive and reflects almost all standards, guidelines, hypotheses, principles and CLT but under broader categories.

Findings and Discussions Related to the Second Question

To answer the second question which is "What topic areas of TEFL dissertations at Amman Arab University for Graduate Studies are: over researched, satisfactorily researched, neglected areas or need more research? Is there is any statistically significant differences at $\alpha = 0.01$ due to topic area? the researchers calculated chi-square of goodness of fit to compare the observed frequencies with expected frequencies of AAUGS's dissertations topic areas categories. Table 1 presents the findings:

Table 1. χ^2 Values of AAUGS Dissertations' Topic Areas

Rank	Topic Area of the Study	Observed Number	Observed Percentage	Expected Number	Residual	Standardized Residual	χ^2	df	Sig.	Classification
1	Reading	20	24.4	5.125	14.875	6.571	**43.174**	1	0.000	Overflow
2	Writing	10	12.2	5.125	4.875	2.153	**4.637**	1	0.031	Overflow
3	Reading and Writing	10	12.2	5.125	4.875	2.153	**4.637**	1	0.031	Overflow
4	Culture	7	8.5	5.125	1.875	0.828	0.686	1	0.408	Balanced
5	Speaking	5	6.1	5.125	-0.125	-0.055	0.003	1	0.956	Balanced
6	Vocabulary	5	6.1	5.125	-0.125	-0.055	0.003	1	0.956	Balanced
7	Teacher Development	5	6.1	5.125	-0.125	-0.055	0.003	1	0.956	Balanced
8	All Skills	4	4.9	5.125	-1.125	-0.497	0.247	1	0.619	Balanced

9	Grammar & Functions	3	3.7	5.125	-2.125	-0.939	0.881	1	0.348	Balanced
10	ESP	3	3.7	5.125	-2.125	-0.939	0.881	1	0.348	Balanced
11	Listening	2	2.4	5.125	-3.125	-1.380	1.905	1	0.167	Balanced
12	Speaking & Writing	2	2.4	5.125	-3.125	-1.380	1.905	1	0.167	Balanced
13	Reading & Vocabulary	2	2.4	5.125	-3.125	-1.380	1.905	1	0.167	Balanced
14	Learning Styles	2	2.4	5.125	-3.125	-1.380	1.905	1	0.167	Balanced
15	Teaching Translation	1	1.2	5.125	-4.125	-1.822	3.320	1	0.068	Balanced
16	Teaching Literature	1	1.2	5.125	-4.125	-1.822	3.320	1	0.068	Balanced
	Total	82	100.0	82	0	0	**69.415**	15	0.000	

Table 1 shows that there is a statistically significant difference at α = 0.01 due to topic area in favor of reading skill with 24.4 percentage which could be considered as the only over-researched topic area. Writing as a separate skill along with reading and writing as integrative skills approached the expected number with chi-square value of 4.637 which could be regarded as satisfactorily researched areas. The other topic areas are regarded as either neglected or poorly-researched areas.

If initial analysis of Table 1 relies on the notion that there is nearly a one-to-one correspondence between research in EFL in Jordan and actual classroom practices, it will be tolerable to say that it shows that reading and writing skills are highly investigated as separate skills and integrative skills to reach 48 per cent of total dissertations. While speaking and listening research dissertations are less than 10 per cent of total dissertations. Such percentages reflect the dominance of reading and writing on English classes in Jordan at the expense of listening and speaking. Taking into consideration that most of this research is conducted on English classes at public schools; a proper justification will be attributed to the large number of students inside the classroom, lack of audio-visual equipment and almost unqualified teachers. The research on grammar, functions and language use is among the least of almost 4 per cent. Finally culture research reveals that it is gaining a growing emphasis upon considering the dates of research dissertations, i.e. four dissertations out of seven are in 2008. Going back to the lion's share of research "reading skill" indicates that almost one third of English lesson's time is on reading (almost 30 per cent of research). However, such a percentage is swollen by adding the 6 per cent of vocabulary research to be 36 per cent of total number of EFL dissertations' research at AAUGS.

Focus on Reading
There are 20 Ph.D. dissertations on reading in addition to 10 dissertations on the integration of reading and writing, about ten of them discuss strategic teaching of reading. Most of them measure the effect of certain factors on students reading comprehension, like the effect

of type and language of assessment, of computerized instructional reading problem, of generative teaching model, of teacher-student reading conferences, of text structure approach and of cooperative learning. The strategic themes are in congruence with Brown's fifth principle of strategic investment. There are nearly five dissertations that examine learning styles (12, 14, 15, 16, and 17) with focus on cooperative learning. There are five dissertations that investigate affective needs of the students (9, 13, 17, 18, and 20) with major focus on motivation. Text types of reading passages are discussed in one dissertation (5). On the other hand, these dissertations almost lack content analysis of text books to measure the contextuality and the degree of authenticity of reading passages and their effects on students' achievements, themes that are emphasized in APGs, Omaggio's Hypotheses and Brown's Principles. Furthermore, there is a salient deficiency in measuring the cultural elements in reading passages, thus the standards of communities, comparisons and communications are not almost tackled.

Focus on Writing

There are 10 Ph.D. dissertations on writing; all of them almost emphasize the strategic teaching of writing which is in line with Brown's fifth principle of strategic investment. An investigation of technology theme like Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and on-line learning program is examined in two dissertations (3, 4). Process approach to teaching writing along with examining students learning styles are introduced on a dissertation (9). Finally, the tenth study is an innovative one as it enhances students' self-assessment strategies in writing. Nevertheless, these dissertations lack studies on the students' needs and levels that promote designing activities to suit various levels (controlled activities -> guided activities -> creative activities) within the same class, a theme that is in compliance with all the constituents of Proficiency Quartet. Remarkable areas of study in a productive skill like writing are creativity and accuracy especially at high intermediate and advanced levels in addition to feedback and error correction strategies which are totally untouched.

Conclusion:

It could be concluded that the dearth of the research on the TEFL, i.e. accumulative research that scientifically traces the trends of EFL in Jordan indirectly affects EFL students' proficiency. Consequently, 50 percent of PhD TEFL dissertations focus which were awarded by AAUGS was on two skills, namely reading and writing leaving other areas as either neglected or poorly-researched areas. To the best knowledge of the researchers, there are no systematic accredited procedures to steer the wheel of EFL research into raw areas that take into account the international and up-to-date research findings in EFL, in particular the concept of World Englishes. Finally, there is a remarkable lack of equilibrium between research findings & recommendations and actual teaching practices due to the broken channels of communication between the Ministries of Education and Higher Education on one hand and Universities on the other hand, and even within the same university.

About the Authors:
Dr. Rabab A. Mizher: Head of the English Language and Literature Department - Balqa Applied University – Jordan**.** Research interests: Translation Strategies, Contrastive Linguistics, TEFL, Teacher Development, Sociolinguistics and ESP. Publications: Attitudes towards Using Standard Arabic among Academic Staff at Balqa Applied University/Center in Jordan: A Sociolinguistic Study.

Dr. Oqlah M. Smadi is a professor of Applied Linguistics, Faculty of Education , Yarmouk University – Jordan **.** Research Interests: First and Second / Foreign Language Acquisition, TEFL, TAFL, Discourse Analysis, Contrastive Linguistics.

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