Reading Difficulties In English As Foreign Language Among Primary School Students: A Case Study

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Abstract

Language is a strong and useful instrument for communicating ideas, feelings, attitudes, and intentions. Every nation has its own national language. Language learning is a process to communicate with others in a particular language. There are four basic skills (Listening, speaking, reading and writing) for a good communication. Reading is basic and essential skill in language learning. Countries like Pakistan use English as foreign language (EFL) facing difficulties in reading. It is big problem that our students cannot read a text with fluency and proper pronunciation. The study was conducted in order to identify the reading difficulties of primary school students in Islamabad in English. Descriptive research methodology was adopted to collect the data. A questionnaire was designed on five point Lickert Scale for Area Education Office Urban-II Islamabad, which was consisted on 29 primary institutions with 16,225 students. Sample was 406 students from 29 primary schools of Area Education Office Urban-II Islamabad under Federal Government, 14 students from grade five were selected randomly from each school with equal representation. The collected data was analyzed through SPSS for percentage and mean score. Based on findings and analysis, it was found that primary school student were facing difficulties in reading due to several factors, pronunciation, new words (vocabulary), accent, vowel and silent words, spelling variability and fluency. These difficulties were due to traditional teaching practices, lack of reading activities in class and Lack of helping & interactive material like story books. Majority of the respondents suggested that their reading skills can be improved by eliminating phonetic difficulties, Motivation, role play, activity based learning and personalized learning in class, basic English level videos and establishing English Language Lab in primary schools of Islamabad

Keywords: Language, reading skills, reading difficulties, primary school students

Introduction

Language is a system of common written or spoken symbols that human beings use to communicate. It serves as the vehicle for communication between the greatest creation humans and even with animals. Language is a strong and useful instrument for communicating ideas, feelings, attitudes, and intentions. Only human beings employ language for communication, in contrast to all other animals (Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol.13). Every state has its own "National Language," a means of communicating its ideas and customs that cover social, cultural, and official spheres of interest. English as foreign language is also necessary, in order to acquire current scientific information, to understand emerging trends of science and technology and enable cross-border collaborations. Particularly English has become international

language around the globe due to several factors, including literary, social, political, and economic (Rasheed.S, 2011).

People all around the globe are studying English because it provides them greater information, better employment prospects, and efficient international communication. English has emerged as the language of communication on a global scale. As a result, it is crucial that our students possess the four core English language competencies of listening, speaking, reading and writing. These abilities are separated into two groups: productive abilities, which include speaking and writing, and receptive abilities, which include reading and listening. Most of these abilities are related to one another (Mumtaz, 2006).

Reading is a complex process that entails reading between the lines, reading beyond the lines, and reading the lines. This suggests that while interacting with a text, a reader has to be both critical and creative (Bhan, 2010). Dadzie (2008) portrays reading as an interactive activity where the reader interacts with the text and its context to generate meanings. To draw the reader's attention, it is imperative that this study emphasize the reading challenges and pertinent statistics found in previous studies, regarding reading English as foreign language. Cunningham (2000) states that basic reading challenges in primary school include comprehension, reading speed, and word identification and interpretation issues. These issues affect public as well.

Raheem (2021) draws attention to related previous studies. Reading difficulties can have many different causes, and a common typology of the most frequent types of challenges has already been presented. These challenges include insufficient directional abilities, poor spatial comprehension skills, wrong word identification and recognition, slow understanding rate, and difficulties in adjusting to various reading parameters. The inability to accurately decode texts in terms of their linguistic form, content and function, are major factors contributing to these reading difficulties. Term "Content" refers to the lexical and semantic connections between different words, whereas "Form" refers to a language user's phonological,

syntactic, and morphological abilities. Similarly term, "Function" describes a person's capacity for pragmatic language usage in a certain setting. Deavers (2000) addressed many reading-related issues based on these ideas. These issues include letters omission, letters addition, the replacement of similar words or sounds and the incorrect use of rhythm when reading.

Krashen (2007) made it very clear that teacher must work for successfully transferring of these abilities to students when there is a crucial assignment to teach English reading skills at the basic education level, So that pupils can meet their learning objectives. Writing and reading comprehension are the main areas of emphasis in English language teaching in Pakistan. It is thought that in order to accomplish their educational & professional career goals, they must have good hand on English. The two receptive abilities are listening and reading. Reading is more than just making sounds; it's about identifying and comprehending the sounds that are uttered. It improves speaking and listening comprehension as well as reading fluency, accent, and pronunciation. Nations with strong literary traditions and cultures tend to have more skillful readers (Mumtaz, 2006)

Reading contributes to vocabulary growth, which enhances listening comprehension. The significance of reading is emphasized in the Noble Quran's first revelation: "Read in the name of your Lord who created." He used a blood clot to create man. Go through..." (Verses 1-3 of Surah Al-Alaq, Chapter 30, The Noble Quran). Access to the realm of information and comprehension can be gained through reading. Speaking and listening are not the same as reading. Because it may improve total language competency, reading is the most important of the four language skills (Krashen & Brown, 2007). Reading is also associated with success because it facilitates understanding written or printed information, which is necessary for professional conversations and engagements. People where English is spoken as a foreign language may struggle with reading and comprehension.

Reading comprehension goes beyond only recognizing or understanding individual words as our eyes skim over them. It is emphasized in all comprehension

models that readers must create a mental recognition of the text. Integration of several information sources is necessary for this process, ranging from lexical aspects to globally intellectual forums (Garnham, 2001).

Students, teachers and parents have substantial hurdles in reading, understanding, and comprehending in English as foreign language. Young learners frequently do not have the requisite exposure as well as peers who are fluent in language, social background and supportive environment setting. For young students learning English as a foreign language (EFL), environment, guidance, motivation and care have a role in the development of reading and other language abilities. Predominately, young student's ability to overcome obstacles to their EFL reading skill is mostly dependent on their upbringing and socialization (Alqarni, 2015)

Statement of Problem

This study aimed to determine the reading difficulties of young learners in English as foreign language in terms of accuracy, comprehension and reading speed in primary schools of Islamabad. English reading skills are vital skills to marvel at every stage of their academics. After Single National Curriculum (SNC) all textbooks are now in English so it is very important for teachers as well as students to know about basic and advanced skills in reading which eventually will be helpful in writing. For this purpose it was necessary to conduct a research to know about difficulties in reading, deficiencies in teaching methodology and suggest improvement in English reading skills. So, current study addresses the difficulties faced by primary school students in English as foreign language in academic setting,

Objectives of Study

The objectives of the study were as follows,

i. To find out the reading difficulties in English of primary school students.

ii. To find out deficiencies in teaching regarding English reading skills of primary school students.

iii. To identify some suggestions to promote reading skills of primary school students in English.

Literature Review

English reading skills are essential in today's globalized world. Proficiency in reading English opens doors to vast information resources, enabling access to academic research, professional development materials, and international news. It enhances critical thinking and comprehension, allowing individuals to engage with diverse perspectives and cultures. Furthermore, strong English reading skills are crucial for effective communication in both personal and professional contexts, facilitating better understanding and collaboration across different fields. Ultimately, mastering English reading skill empowers individuals to succeed in a variety of environments, fostering lifelong learning and growth (Telez, 2006).

Proficiency in English reading helps students understand and excel in other subjects, as many textbooks and educational resources are in English. It enhances their ability to comprehend complex concepts and perform well in examinations. English is often required for higher education and many professional fields in Pakistan. Early development of reading skills prepares students for future academic pursuits and career opportunities, making them more competitive in the job market (Tabi, 2014). Rivers (1981) emphasized the importance of reading skills in education and their role in fostering academic success and lifelong learning. Rivers likely stressed that reading skills serve as a foundational aspect of education, influencing students' abilities to comprehend and engage with various subjects across the curriculum. Readers have to use their prior knowledge while reading in order to construct meaning.

Goodman (1973), a prominent figure in the field of literacy education, is known for his whole language approach to reading instruction. He advocated for a meaning-centered approach to reading, where the focus is on understanding and making sense of text rather than simply decoding words. He believed that reading should be viewed as a constructive process where readers actively construct meaning from text based on their prior knowledge and experiences. Ehri (1991) identified four distinct methods by which individuals read words. Decoding method involves

using knowledge of phonics to sound out words. Readers break down words into their constituent phonemes (sounds) and blend these sounds together to form the word. This strategy is particularly common in beginning readers who are learning to connect letters with their corresponding sounds.

In analogizing approach, readers use their knowledge of familiar words to recognize and read new words. For instance, a reader who knows the word "cat" might use this knowledge to read the word "bat" by noticing the similarity in spelling and pronunciation patterns. Predicting method involves using context clues from the surrounding text and the reader's background knowledge to predict what a word might be. Readers often use this strategy when they encounter an unfamiliar word, relying on the meaning of the sentence or passage to make an educated guess about the word's identity. Sight word reading strategy involves recognizing words instantly without having to sound them out. Sight words are typically high-frequency words that readers have memorized and can identify quickly and effortlessly. As readers become more proficient, they build a larger repertoire of sight words, which aids in reading fluency and comprehension.

Reading Difficulties:

Difficulties can be defined as the condition or quality of being challenging or hard to manage. They represent troublesome or embarrassing states of affairs, much like the complexities encountered in language learning. A difficult idea or situation is similar to a knot or something that is tied up, tangled, or twisted. When you successfully navigate or resolve such difficulties, it is similar to untying these knots and clearing away the tangles. Reading gives us access to a world of information and comprehension and frequently inspires us to change our goals, attitudes, and thoughts. Furthermore, reading fosters curiosity and is essential for intellectual growth. It does, however, also provide a number of difficulties (Mohammad, 2021).

Bajwa (2007) described that there are no linguistic similarities between English and Pakistani languages. The alphabets used in Pakistani languages differ from used in English. Second, English is written from left to right, but Urdu and other Pakistani

languages are written from right to left. Finally, learners may find it more difficult to learn English since it differs greatly from Pakistani languages in sentence structure. The learning of English reading by Pakistani primary school students face the fundamental difficulty of limited exposure to English at home, making it harder to develop proficiency.

This is akin to encountering a tangled knot of unfamiliar vocabulary and grammar rules that they must carefully untangle. The lack of well-trained teachers who can effectively teach English reading skills can create a significant obstacle. Poor instructional methods and inadequate support are like tight knots that prevent students from making smooth progress in reading. Insufficient access to books, libraries, and other educational materials is another major hurdle. This scarcity is comparable to trying to untangle a knot without the proper tools, making the task much more challenging. Overcrowded classrooms hinder personalized attention, which is crucial for addressing individual reading difficulties. This situation can be seen as a large, complicated knot that is difficult to manage without individualized strategies. Students from low-income families often face additional challenges that detract from their focus on learning. These external pressures can be likened to external tangles that complicate the knot, making the overall situation more difficult to untangle.

Difficulties of Vocabulary and Spelling

Mohammad & Rashid (2017) briefed that students often encounter numerous new words whose meanings are not clear to them, which hampers their ability to understand given texts. A broad vocabulary is essential for children to label their knowledge and experiences accurately. The breadth and depth of a student's vocabulary provide the foundation for successful reading. According to Tomlinson (2007), oral vocabulary is made up of the words that are used in conversation, and even students who have a big oral vocabulary may find it difficult to read if they have a little reading vocabulary. Because English spelling is so complicated, Pakistani students have a lot of difficulty with spelling. Spellings frequently diverge from

pronunciation, resulting in a multitude of mistakes. For beginning learners, this challenge is made more difficult by the distinctions between American and British English.

Chandran & Shah (2019) explained that English reading skills present significant challenges, particularly regarding vocabulary and spelling, for primary school students in Pakistan. English has a vast and diverse vocabulary with numerous synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms, which can be overwhelming for learners. English includes many borrowed words from other languages, each with unique spellings and pronunciations that do not always follow regular patterns. Unlike phonetic languages, English spelling is not always consistent with pronunciation. Words like "knight" and "knife" contain silent letters, making them difficult for learners to decode and spell correctly.

Difficulties of Pronunciation and Grammar

Pronunciation is another big obstacle in reading process. A Pakistani student has to master many sub skills in order to pronounce words correctly in English. Kaur (2006) highlighted the significance of acquiring the English language's pronunciation which involves a large number of new skills, especially recognition skills. English pronunciation often does not match its spelling. Words like "through," "though," and "thought" are spelled similarly but pronounced differently, causing confusion. Words with silent letters, such as "knight" and "knife," pose a challenge as the letters are present in spelling but not pronounced. English has a variety of vowel sounds, some of which do not exist in Pakistani languages. Differentiating between short and long vowel sounds (e.g., "bit" vs. "beat") can be difficult. Pronouncing consonant clusters (e.g., "strength," "world") is challenging for learners used to simpler consonant-vowel structures. English relies heavily on intonation and stress patterns to convey meaning, which can be difficult for non-native speakers to master.

Raheem (2021) told that English sentence structure (Subject-Verb-Object) differs from Urdu and other Pakistani languages, leading to difficulties in constructing grammatically correct sentences. English has twelve tense forms, each

with specific rules, whereas Pakistani languages have fewer. Mastering these forms can be challenging. The use of definite (the) and indefinite (a, an) articles in English, which do not have direct equivalents in many Pakistani languages, can be confusing. Bajwa (2007) explained that English prepositions often do not translate directly into Pakistani languages, making their correct usage difficult (e.g., "in," "on," "at"). Learning the past forms of irregular verbs (e.g., "go" to "went," "see" to "saw") requires memorization and practice. Ensuring that subjects and verbs agree in number and person is crucial in English but can be tricky for learners from different grammatical backgrounds.

Difficulties of Speed Reading

Speed reading, the ability to read quickly while understanding and retaining information, poses several challenges for primary school students in Pakistan. These difficulties stem from various factors, including limited exposure to English, cognitive load, and the complexity of the English language. Abraham (1993) highlighted that because so much content is created every day in this era of explosive information, reading speed is essential. A sluggish reader is unable to meet the expectations of the modern world. According to Bajwa (2007), readers who read excessively quickly or slowly have a lower chance of understanding the content. Because texts are complicated, readers need to be adaptable and change their reading speed accordingly. They should accelerate for simpler, less information-dense texts and slow down for more complex ones

Methodology

The methodology section outlined the research design and methods for conducting the study on reading difficulties in English as Foreign Language in primary school students. This research adopted a descriptive quantitative in nature.

Population and Sampling.

Population of study was Area Education Office Urban-II Islamabad, which was

consisted on 29 primary institutions with 16,225 students. Sample was 406 students from 29 primary schools of Area Education Office Urban-II Islamabad under Federal Government, 14 students from grade five were selected randomly from each school with equal representation to conduct the study (Gay, 1996, p.125).

Research Instrument, Reliability and Validation

The study was descriptive in nature, therefore to collect data, a questionnaire of 21 items was developed on five-point (Likert) scale with three categories having 7 items in each category. Ensuring the validity and reliability of research instruments was crucial. So instrument was validated through pilot testing on 50 students.

Data Collection and Data Analysis

Data was collected through personal visits on structured questionnaire to find out reading difficulties in English as foreign Language. Quantitative data collected from the surveys was analyzed using descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentage and mean score,

ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS OF DATA

Objective 1. To find out the reading difficulties in English of primary school students.

Sr #	Statement	f%	SA	A	USC	DA	SDA	Mean Score
1	Students face difficulties in reading English textbook.	N	98	126	57	60	65	3.33
		%	24.14	31.03	14.04	14.78	16.01	
2	Students read English slowly.	N	102	102	33	80	85	3.11
		%	25.12	25.12	8.13	19.70	20.94	
3	Students have difficulty in pronouncing silent and vowel words.	N	113	132	19	66	76	3.34
		%	27.83	32.51	4.68	16.25	18.71	
4	Students make reading	N	127	109	22	71	77	3.34

#	Statement							Mean
	mistakes due to spelling variability.	%	31.28	26.85	5.42	17.49	18.97	
5	Students struggle with phonetics while reading English textbook	N	145	102	28	46	85	**3.43**
		%	35.71	25.12	6.90	11.33	20.94	
6	Students find it difficult to read new words.	N	108	122	18	76	82	**3.24**
		%	26.60	30.05	4.43	18.72	20.20	
7	Students struggle to read texts with the correct accent.	N	89	122	31	56	108	**3.07**
		%	21.92	30.05	7.64	13.79	26.60	

Table # 4.1 Reading difficulties in English at primary school level.

In table # 4.1 shows that slight majority (55.17% with 3.33 mean score) of students/respondents were agreed that they had difficulties in reading English textbooks. A slight majority (50.24% with 3.11 mean score) of the students/respondents were of the opinion that students read English Slowly. Most of the students/respondents (60.34% with 3.34 mean score) portrayed their opinion that students had difficulties in pronouncing vowel and silent words while reading English. Large number of (58.13% with 3.34 mean score) of the respondents/students expressed their views that student made reading mistakes due to spelling variability. Majority of respondents (60.83% with 3.43 mean score) agreed that students struggled with phonetics while reading English textbook. A majority of the respondents (56.65% with 3.24 mean score) agreed with the statement that students found it difficult to read new words. Majority (51.97% with 3.07) of the students/respondents showed their opinion that students struggled to read text with correct accent.

Objective 2.   To find out deficiencies in teaching regarding English reading skills of primary school students.

Sr #	Statement	f %	SA	A	USC	DA	SDA	Mean Score
1	Teachers use videos in class to improve students' English reading abilities.	N	82	65	27	107	125	2.68
		%	20.20	16.01	6.65	26.35	30.79	
2	Teachers continuously arrange reading activities to enhance reading skills.	N	102	98	23	97	86	3.08
		%	25.12	24.14	5.67	23.89	21.18	
3	Teachers organize role-play activities to promote reading skills.	N	76	86	19	111	114	2.75
		%	18.72	21.18	4.68	27.34	28.08	
4	Teachers provide interesting reading material to Students in class	N	88	76	18	123	101	2.82
		%	21.67	18.72	4.43	30.30	24.88	
5	Teachers use the word-by-word translation method to improve reading skills.	N	145	102	28	46	85	3.43
		%	35.71	25.12	6.90	11.33	20.94	
6	Teachers help students to read new words accurately	N	108	122	18	76	82	3.24
		%	26.60	30.05	4.43	18.72	20.20	
7	Teachers use English storybooks to promote reading skills.	N	89	102	31	76	108	2.97
		%	21.92	25.12	7.64	18.72	26.60	

Table # 4.2 Deficiencies in Teaching regarding English Reading skills

In table # 4.2 shows that slight majority (57.14% with 2.68 mean score) of students/respondents were disagreed that teacher used videos in class to improve students' English reading abilities. Most (49.24% with 3.108 mean score) of the students/respondents were of the opinion that teacher continuously arranged reading activities to enhance reading skills. Most of the students/respondents (55.42% with 2.75 mean score) portrayed their opinion that teachers did not

organize role play activities to promote reading skills. Large number of (55.18% with 2.82 mean score) of the respondents/students expressed their views that teacher did not provide interesting reading material to students in class. Majority of the respondents (60.83% with 3.43 mean score) agreed with the statement that teacher used the word by word translation method to improve reading skills. A slight majority (56.65% with 3.24 mean score) were agreed that teacher helped students to read new words accurately. Most (45.32% with 2.97 mean score) of the students/respondents showed that their teacher did not use English story books to promote reading skills.

Objective 3. **To identify some suggestions to promote reading skills of primary school students in English.**

Sr #	Statement	f %	SA	A	USC	DA	SDA	Mean Score
1	Students are more involved in reading through Role Play/Activity Based Learning	N	98	126	57	60	65	3.33
		%	24.14	31.03	14.04	14.78	16.01	
2	Students are more fluent in reading English by eliminating phonetic difficulties	N	102	102	33	80	85	3.108
		%	25.12	25.12	8.13	19.70	20.94	
3	Motivation enhances reading skills of students	N	113	132	19	66	76	3.345
		%	27.83	32.51	4.68	16.26	18.720	
4	Personalized learning in class provide extra help to improve reading skills	N	127	109	22	71	77	3.340
		%	31.28	26.85	5.42	17.49	18.97	
5	Students have English	N	145	102	28	46	85	3.43

#	Statement							Mean
	language Labs to enhance reading skills	%	35.71	25.12	6.90	11.33	20.94	3
6	Students use to watch basic English level cartoons to improve reading skills	N	108	122	18	76	82	3.241
		%	26.60	30.05	4.43	18.72	20.20	
7	Reading with expression and concentration enhances reading skills in students	N	89	122	31	56	108	3.069
		%	21.92	30.05	7.64	13.79	26.60	

Table # 4.3 Suggestions to Promote Reading Skills in English.

In table # 4.3 shows that slight majority (55.17% with m3.33 mean score) of students/respondents agreed that students are more involved in through role play/activity based learning. Most (50.24% with 3.108 mean score) of the students/respondents were of the opinion that students are more fluent in reading English by eliminating phonetic difficulties. Most of the students/respondents (57.93% with 3.34 mean score) portrayed the opinion that motivation enhances reading skills of students. Large number of (58.13% with 3.34 mean score) of the respondents/students expressed their views that personalized learning in class provides extra help to improve reading skills. Majority of the respondents (60.83% with 3.43 mean score) agreed with the statement that students have English Language Lab to enhance reading skills. A slight majority (56.65% with 3.24 mean score) were agreed that students use to watch basic English level cartoons to improve reading skills. Most (41.97% with 3.069 mean score) of the students/respondents showed that reading with expression and concentration enhances reading skills in students.

Discussion And Recommendations

This study was conducted to find out reading difficulties in English of primary school students, to indicate the reason of those difficulties and to provide solution for promoting reading skills in English. First objective was, to find out the Reading difficulties in English of primary school students. The research questionnaire reveals

that students face difficulties in reading English textbook having no fluency. Students have difficulty in pronouncing silent and vowel words. Students are struggling due to spelling variability and phonetic issues, Students find it difficult to read new words with correct accent (Fareed, 2018).

The second object was, to find out deficiencies in teaching approach regarding English Reading skills of primary school students. The outcomes of study show that Teachers are not using videos (Learning by watching/seeing) in class to improve students' English reading abilities. Teachers are not continuously arranging reading activities to enhance reading skills. Teachers are not organizing role-play activities to promote reading skills. Teachers are not providing interesting reading material to Students in class Teachers are using the word-by-word translation method (traditional method of teaching) to improve reading skills. Teachers are helping to students to read new words accurately but not to optimum level. Teachers are using English storybooks to promote reading skills but not optimum level (Rasheed.S, 2011).

The third objective was, to identify some suggestions to promote Reading skills of primary school students in English. The discussion reveals that students are more involved in reading through Role Play/Activity Based Learning. Students are more fluent in reading English by eliminating phonetic difficulties. Motivation enhances reading skills of students. Personalized learning in class provides extra help to improve reading skills. Students have English language Labs to enhance reading skills. Students use to watch basic English level cartoons to improve reading skills, Reading with expression and concentration enhances reading skills in students (Raheem, 2021). On the basis of above discussion, following recommendations are given to improve/promote reading skills of primary school students in English as foreign language.

1. New teaching methodologies like personalized learning in class must be opted to enhance reading skills in English of primary school students.

2. It is very obvious to motivate primary school students to take part in reading

activities as many of student are shy to participate

3. Teacher must opt activity based learning and role play method which not only activate students but also involve students to promote their reading skills in English

4. Students have several difficulties like spelling variability, silent and vowel words, accent, new word pronunciation, lack of concentration and lack of motivation. These difficulties are eliminated through participatory approach and basic English cartoons to promote reading skills in primary school students

5. It is very compulsory that there must to English language Labs in primary schools to promote reading skills in students and mitigate the difficulties.

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