

## **Exploring Classroom Practices for Developing Reading Fluency in Public Schools**

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### **KEY WORDS**

reading fluency, classroom practices, round robin reading, grammar translation method.

### **ABSTRACT**

Reading fluency remains the neglected skill in the research and practices in language teaching and learning. Only a few research documents the classroom practices for developing reading fluency in public schools of Punjab, Pakistan. Qualitative research was conducted in a public school in Punjab to explore classroom practices in developing reading fluency. The interview and focus group discussions best suited the objective to reveal the current practices. The bilingual data collected was analyzed on NVivo 12 for developing themes and sub themes. The data revealed that the focus of language teaching in public schools is translation and grammar. Reading a textbook lesson is generally done once that too along with translation either word to word or line wise. The two reading techniques practiced in the classes are echo reading and round robin reading but this reading is not 'Only English' text reading but always done with translation either after the teacher or independently by the students who learn translation by heart. The teachers realize that developing fluency is important to language learning but do not use any technique for developing reading fluency as teaching practices are exam-driven hence not only fluency but reading skill remains neglected in public school classrooms.

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### **Introduction**

English is the official language in post-colonial Pakistan (Rahman, 2005) learnt as a second language. It is the language of Education and medium of instruction in the schools (Mansoor, 2003; Muhammad, 2013). The paradigm of research in English language teaching in Pakistan is ripe with measuring effectiveness of all methodologies, their comparisons, finding gaps in research and practice, and what not (Awan & Nawaz, 2015;

Behlol & Anwar, 2011). Reading skill is the basic receptive skill for ESL learners. The fundamental objective of education is to teach students to read well (Zimmerman et al., 2019). Making all students read well requires specialized instructions. According to Zimmerman et al. (2019) some students may learn with limited exposure or incidental instruction, the rest never become good readers unless reading is taught through proven instructional approaches. With the research on reading skill being prominently dominant with the focus on reading comprehension, reading fluency is rightly being called as a neglected reading goal (Young & Ortlieb, 2018), though research shows that reading fluency is important for both elementary and secondary grades (Paige, Rasinski, & Magpuri-Lavell, 2012; Young & Ortlieb, 2018). Fluency is an important skill for a good reader and McTeer (2020) calls it a fundamental ability. Reading fluency is defined as the ability to be free from word identification problems that may obstruct comprehension and it's the bridge that links phonics to comprehension that occurs when one embeds meaningful expression into one's reading (Song, Georgiou, Su, & Hua, 2016). Uysal and Bilge (2018) claim that reading fluency along with other basic skills i.e., vocabulary, world knowledge and inferencing abilities are necessary to reach the goal of reading comprehension. Reading fluency serves as the bridge for reading comprehension (Kang & Shin, 2019; Uysal & Bilge, 2018; Velchick, 2019; Wang, 2011) as shown in the figure below.

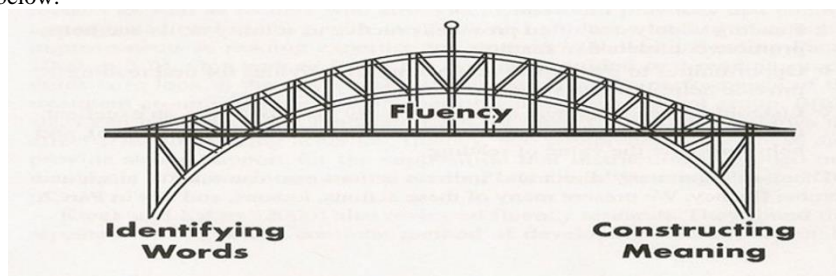


Figure 1: Reading Fluency as a bridge between decoding and comprehension. (Johns & Berglund, 2010)

There is no research conducted in Pakistan to report the classroom reading practices for developing reading fluency. However, certain instances of classroom practices have been reported as part of research on reading comprehension and reading strategies (Nawab, 2012). The two studies discuss the situation and issues of L2 reading instruction in Pakistan to some extent. But they are not sufficient to present a realistic picture of L2 reading instruction in Pakistan (Memon & Badger, 2007; Muhammad, 2013). Therefore, exploratory research to determine classroom practices for developing reading fluency needed to be conducted for a real picture to emerge.

### Objective

The objective of the research is to explore the common practices for developing reading fluency in public schools. The research would highlight real life English teaching classroom practices in public schools and the level of focus in developing reading fluency as reflected by the stakeholders (principal, teachers and learners) of school education system. The study is delimited to grade 7 of a public school in Sheikhpura only due to constraints of time and resources.

## Research Questions

The study intends to explore the following questions,

Q1: What are the common classroom practices for developing reading fluency in public schools?

Q2: What is the focus of English language classroom instruction in public schools?

## Fluency

Fluency is defined as the ability of a person to accurately and quickly translate a text orally with proper expression (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins, 2001). Rasinki (2019) defines fluency as a combination of two aspects, automatic and accurate word recognition, and prosodic reading. It is very important to understand that the ultimate goal of reading is to grasp the meaning of text and comprehend what is being read. Reading fluency is a vehicle for reading comprehension as fluency is crucial to reading development of children (Bashir & Hook, 2009).

## Techniques to Improve Reading Fluency

Several techniques have been proposed and practiced to improve reading fluency. The continuum of techniques practiced to improve reading fluency varies from structuralism to constructivism. The techniques that lie in structuralism are echo reading, choral reading, round robin reading and repeated readings, while extensive reading, sustained silent reading, and readers theatre lie in the constructivist's domain. There are a few that lie in the middle of continuum like phrase boundaries, and previewing. Let's elaborate them a little to understand how they function to improve reading skill of learners.

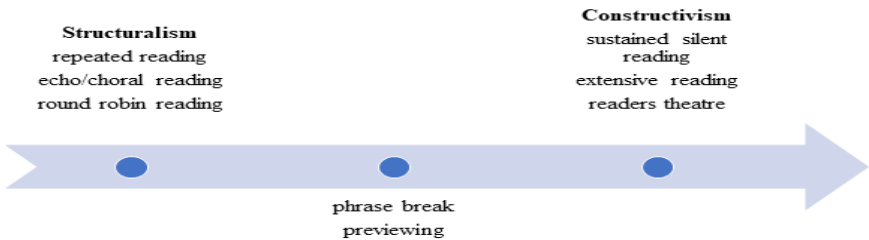


Figure 2: A continuum of fluency techniques from structuralism to constructivism.

**Echo reading** can be done in small or whole groups and involves the students by reading after the skilled reader. It makes the student able to read a difficult text and serves as an exposure to good pronunciation (Johns & Berglund, 2010). Knoll (2015) reports that echo reading is effective to improve reading fluency of learners. **Choral reading** is similar to echo reading where students read in unison. Repeated practice makes reading enjoyable (Johns & Berglund, 2010). **Round robin reading** is an obsolete method of reading that was used in 1980's. In round robin reading, each student in class is made to read a section of text aloud in front of the whole class. This reading technique puts undue pressure on the student and increases his fear of making mistakes and being mocked in the class. It marginally demotivates the readers specially while reading a difficult text or a text above their current proficiency level. **Repeated reading** is an evidenced based strategy that increases reading comprehension and reading fluency among readers. Repeated practice of reading results in pronunciation improvement, automaticity in word recognition and

accuracy. Repeated reading indirectly helps students improve their reading comprehension as with each round of reading, students are learning and decoding meaning in the text (Kuhn, 2005; Samuels, 1979). Repeated reading helps students focus on all the components of reading fluency including prosody, accuracy and automaticity. Chard, Vaughn, and Tyler (2002) and Kuhn (2005) suggest that reading in repeated reading with a model seems more effective as compared to repeated reading with no model.

Previewing is one activity that triggers the schema of the learners and prepares him for the new language. Previewing a text includes such activities as outline of the reading text, teaching of some important concept that the text deals in, presenting difficult or new vocabulary and structures. Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is a very effective activity for ESL readers. The main focus of SSR program is the student-selected text to enhance interest and motivation. They select their own text in terms of length, level of difficulty and topic. Students while choosing a text for reading are in fact, making use of their background knowledge that helps in reading comprehension overall (Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983).

Nation (1997) has advocated the use of extensive reading in language learning. Extensive reading involves “each learner independently and silently reading a lot of material at the right level for him” (Nation & Waring, 2019). Right level for the learner means that the material has very small number of unknown words so that the reader can read independently. It is found that extensive reading makes learners better readers, improves reading fluency and reading comprehension because good readers are fast readers (Villanueva de Debat, 2006) and good readers are good at not just reading fast but at comprehension, vocabulary and pronunciation too.

This section dealt with an overview of the classroom techniques and practices that influence reading fluency. The impact of these activities on areas of language learning have been pointed out too.

## Methodology

Since the purpose of the research was to explore the current practices to develop reading fluency in public schools hence qualitative research was designed and the data was collected in the form of interview of principal, a focus group of English language teachers and another focus group of grade 7 learners of public school in Punjab. The focus group of teachers included teachers teaching English subject in elementary and secondary section whereas the learners were from grade 7, as they are mature enough to express their opinion. The data was collected from one public school from district Sheikhpura of Punjab as per convenience. The ethical considerations were met to conduct and record the data and the anonymity was ensured.

### Interviews and Focus Groups

Edley and Litosseliti (2010) have put interviews and focus group together on the basis that they are closely related to each other. They recommend a constructivist’s view that interviews and focus groups are interactive and collaborative events in which both parties participate. Dörnyei (2007) and Edley and Litosseliti (2010) claim that interviews and focus groups are similar but distinctive in nature. Some researchers place focus group as a subcategory of interviews and use the term ‘focus group interviews. However, Dörnyei (2007) proposes that they should be considered as two related forms of practice that ‘often overlap or bleed into each other’. The unstructured interviews are more flexible, ‘free-flowing and indeterminate’ (Chard et al., 2002) and closer to focus groups (Dörnyei, 2007).

A set of guide questions or topics is used for data collection in which there is margin of elaboration and extension by the participants. The data collected is free standing and independent of the researcher's bias. This is very important to ensure the validity and reliability of the qualitative data (Edley & Litosseliti, 2010). Edley and Litosseliti (2010) puts focus group as a center of knowledge construction or creation rather than a source of data collection therefore the moderator is considered as a participant in the focus group whose ideas and questions shape the knowledge creation. His contribution in the focus group is admitted, as his voice is not considered as researchers' bias. This pragmatic stance in constructivism suited the present study. Edley and Litosseliti (2010) proposes that focus group and interviews can be useful either at the exploratory stage of the research study to develop a hypothesis or at the end of the study to assess the effectiveness of a project. The exploratory nature of the present study demanded the use of interview and focus groups to unveil the classroom practices in English language teaching and particularly the reading practices and beliefs of school stakeholders (principal, teachers and students).

### Bilingual Data Presentation

The qualitative data generated in the research project was in the form of interviews, and focus group discussions. The data collected was bilingual as boundaries between English and Urdu are 'blurring' (Mehvish, 2019) in everyday speech of Pakistanis. The theory and practice describe the conversion of monolingual speech data into written form but very less work is presented in the conversion and analysis of bilingual research data. For this purpose, the theory regarding bilingual research was sought and referred to.

Halai (2007) published a research paper regarding her struggles for converting bilingual speech data into written form and devised seven rules during the process as none of the basic rules and processes existed then. Seeking guidance from her research, the data was transcribed, analyzed for themes and only the reported part of data was translated. Halai (2007) mentioned that another important aspect of bilingual data is the difference in the context and culture of the speakers and the readers. Translation is a cultural issue as well because the views of one group narrated in one language are converted into another language for another group of people. They might be interpreted differently and mean different across people and cultures. Halai (2007) proposes that while translating the target group of readers must be kept in mind. Since I share the culture and language of the research participants, hence there is no gap between us in understanding of meaning. But for a counter check, the translated version of transcription was shared with the participants for confirmation of their intention and meaning. However, my focus during translation remained the reader of my research who could be from any part of the world.

The data was transcribed in roman Urdu and only the texts that were used as references in data presentation were translated. The use of roman Urdu in scripts is very common by native Urdu speakers (Mahmood et al., 2020). The transcripts of the audio recorded data, and translated referred data were shared with the participants for confirmation of their meaning intention.

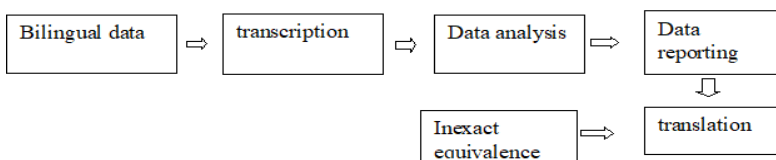


Figure 3: Process of bilingual data analysis and presentation.

### Qualitative data analysis

Qualitative data in the form of the interview of principal, focus group of teachers and focus group of learners was collected, transcribed and analyzed on NVivo 12 for thematic analysis. The data files were manually coded at node level as NVivo did not support roman Urdu text analysis, hence no auto coding was run on the data. The major themes were predetermined as directed by the research question. Two major themes were current classroom practices for developing reading fluency and focus of English language classroom instruction. The subthemes that emerged under current practices are, current practices in the teaching of reading skill, reading techniques used in class, and reading repetitions while, focus on translation, focus on vocabulary, focus on grammar, focus on comprehension and lastly the focus on fluency emerged under focus of classroom instruction as shown in the table below.

Themes and subthemes	Sources (principal, teachers, students)	No. of references
Class practices for reading	3 principal, teachers, students	10
Reading techniques used in class	3 principal, teachers, students	7
Reading repetitions	1 teacher	2
Focus on translation	2 teachers and students	11
Focus on vocabulary	2 teachers and students	5
Focus on grammar	1 teacher	4
Focus on comprehension	2 teachers, students	8
Focus on reading fluency	3 principal, teachers, students	3

Table 1: *Details of sources and number of references in the subthemes of qualitative analysis.*

The table depicts that ample data from all three sources, principal, teachers and students, reflected upon the classroom practices for developing reading skill. Maximum references for translation depict that it remained the focus of interviews and focus group discussions followed by vocabulary and grammar. Though focus on comprehension is prominent node, it was found that comprehension is achieved through translation as well. Focus on fluency gets one reference from each source in the form of simple negation. Developing reading fluency is not neglected but seems altogether absent from English language classroom practices.

### Current Practices in the Teaching of Reading Skill

The principal, teachers and students were all asked to describe the current practices in the teaching of reading in public schools. The learners, the teachers and principal claimed that since they understand that reading is a very important skill hence, reading of each chapter is done in all classes. Reading and writing are the focus of English language teaching, and the major classroom activity is reading the lesson and then writing the comprehension questions.

However, to my surprise, when the learners and teachers say reading is done in class, they mean reading along with translation. Reading English lesson without translation is not even a concept. Hence, I came up with this terminology of 'only English' reading for reading of

the lesson text without translation as for the participants 'reading' refers to reading with translation.

Only one of the teachers in the focus group told that she makes her class read the lesson in 'only English' once or twice. A teacher reported, "a few teachers practice only English reading, but mostly reading is done along with translation and meanings (in L1)." However, learners reported that they don't ever do 'only English' reading of the lessons. Reading in class is always along with translation and meanings. A student reported, "No, we don't read lessons in 'only English'. We translate it line by line." Another one added, "I have never done 'only English' reading since class 1". The teachers also admitted that 'only English' reading is not done in school. They explained, "no, we don't have students who understand by reading in 'only English'".

### **Reading Techniques Used in Class**

The two types of reading techniques are practiced in schools, echo reading and round robin reading. The teacher reads the lesson and the whole class follows and sometimes the students read the lesson turn wise. The principal however opined that the most common practice is the round robin reading and only a few students get to read in classes. The students who are good at reading only read and teachers fail to involve all students in round robin reading.

The practice is to read the lesson along with translation line wise. One sentence or part of a sentence is read in English and translated and then the next sentence by the teacher or a learner while others take notes of translation. Sometimes the same practice is carried out as echo reading, when the class echoes after the teacher, both the English sentence and its translation as a teacher told, "while teaching, I read first and learners follow me."

It was found that the objective of teaching a lesson is being able to translate the English text into L1 hence the lesson is read only to be able to translate it. A teacher told, "reading is basically part of translation." Therefore, the objective is not developing reading skill but translation and reading is practiced as a by-product of translation.

### **Reading Repetitions**

The normal practice is to read the lesson along with translation at least once in class. The teachers said that they may read some lessons twice depending upon the availability of time, once themselves and then ask students to do it next time. There is no concept of reading the lesson more than 2 times. A teacher remarked, "when I read it to them, then I decide depending upon the time if I will do it once or twice."

### **Focus on Translation**

The activity that the teachers, principal and learners described as a reading technique is actually meant for teaching of translation as translating the text into Urdu is one of the major goals of language teaching in Pakistan. Moreover, the exams have a compulsory question of translation; hence the focus of language teaching remains translation. The backwash effect is visible as what is tested is taught in the classroom.

The practice is that the students learn the translation of English lessons. Some bright students have even learnt the lessons by heart and don't even need to see the English paragraph to tell translation. Ask them to translate the second paragraph of such and such lesson, and they will produce it without even reading the passage. A student opined that "the teacher tells us to learn the lesson (learn translation of the lesson) in the free time" and "if there are ten paragraphs in a lesson, she gives us the translation of one paragraph to learn back home each day." Another told, "we learn translation of lessons back home".

### **Focus on Vocabulary**

Teaching vocabulary is an important part of any reading lesson plan. Since in public schools, they rely heavily on translation, hence meanings of difficult words are told in Urdu either before reading or alongside translation. The students and teachers told the same practice for vocabulary teaching. The vocabulary words are then given as homework to be learnt and test is taken the next day. A student told, “yes, the teacher also gives word meanings to learn”.

### **Focus on Grammar**

After translation, the most focused component in English language teaching is grammar. The teachers and students believe firmly that knowledge of grammar is central to learning a language. The teachers said that they do explicit grammar teaching during reading as one of them told that in her last class with grade 6 she asked them to “pick up the pronouns from the lesson.” Another teacher said that she explains after reading the parts of speech in sentences as, “then I explain that what is subject, object, verb, preposition etc. in the sentence we read.” Only one of the teachers said that she does not teach grammar alongside reading and translation.

### **Focus on Comprehension**

Translation is practiced as a source to comprehension too. It is thought that if learners would not know translation, they wouldn't comprehend the lesson. The learners and teachers all believe as translation to be the key for comprehension. One of the teachers in the focus group said, “while reading a students should understand what he/she is reading, if ‘only English’ reading is done, they would decode only and comprehend nothing, so there is no use of it.” Comprehending English text directly is not even a goal for them. It is always translated in L1 and then comprehended. But the strange thing is that after comprehending through translation, still the students don't pick answers from the comprehension passages themselves, but they learn the questions by heart. There are a few comprehension questions at the end of the lessons and students learn the answers of those questions as only the questions in the book come in the exams. Since the end goal of English teaching is attaining good grades instead of learning the language, hence just like translation, comprehension questions are also learnt by heart. A student told, “we learn comprehension questions back home as the teacher takes an oral test/ board test next day.” When probed for not using ‘only English’ reading in the class, the students went blank as they could not even think of any use of ‘only English’ reading in the class. A teacher opined that “she recently met a student from private school who can read (decode) well but has zero comprehension because his school does not translate lessons for them.”

### **Focus on Fluency**

The data revealed that there is no technique used for developing reading fluency in schools. The principal told, “there is no focus on fluency as the time of a period is just 30 minutes and teachers have to cover all syllabus in this time.” There is no specific technique used for developing fluency and the principal opined that “the possibility is that we add a period but that is even not possible.”



## Findings and Discussion

The exploratory research shows a very alarming situation of classroom practices for English language teaching and learning in public schools.

Though there is no study completely encompassing the practices in English language classrooms, but several researchers have reported classroom practices as part of other language researches. The finding that translation and grammar remain the focus of English language teaching is similar to previous findings (Muhammad, 2013). Behlol and Anwar (2011), and Awan and Nawaz (2015) reported the same findings in their research about secondary schools in Pakistan. Not only in Pakistan but Grammar translation method is still the most practiced method in Asian classrooms as it is 'less time consuming' (Awan & Nawaz, 2015). Even the research in Chinese school classrooms reports that 'students accept unquestioningly the words of the teacher' (Kang & Shin, 2019).

Since the focus of language teaching and learning is translation and teaching of grammar components, most of the class time is spent in doing translation as comprehension is addressed through translation as well. The rest of the class time is spent on grammar teaching and learning comprehension questions, vocabulary meanings, even letters, essays and stories are learnt by heart too. The teaching and classroom practices are guided by examination. All the content expected to be produced in the English subject exam is memorized, and orally tested several times before exams. Nawab (2012) reported similar findings from rural areas of KPK where the class time is spent in reading and translating the text into Urdu or mother tongue. Therefore, even after 10 years, the practices in language classrooms are still the same.

Kang and Shin (2019) opine that L2 reading is the major focus of L2 instruction in China and Japan just like Pakistan. However, Nawab (2012) has a different observation. According to him, reading skill is not the focus in language teaching. The language teaching is geared by exams. This matches the findings of the present research. Though, the teachers, learners, and principal all opined that the major focus of language teaching is reading and writing skill but with qualitative analysis, it was revealed that reading is done as a part of translation. The reading techniques in practice are round robin reading and echo reading that are done along with translation. 'Only English' reading is not a norm as it serves no purpose according to teachers and learners in English subject exam. Muhammad (2013) also reports the lack of awareness by English language teachers about the importance of reading and reading instruction models. The round robin reading, an obsolete method that demotivates the learner and hampers his reading skill development is the most practiced method in public schools unfortunately. There is no technique used for developing reading fluency in public schools of Punjab, Pakistan. The English language teachers know that fluency is important to developing reading skill, but they don't realize the potential difference fluency can make towards developing reading skill.

The stakeholders revealed that their classroom practices are totally directed by the examination system. What is asked in exams is taught in class as the main objective of taking English in schools is to pass the exam. Shakil (2020) has expressed the similar concern. The classroom practices in all Asian countries where English is learnt as a second or foreign language, is 'exam-driven'. Kang and Shin (2019) opine that education system of Taiwan is deeply embedded in this confusion style of learning. Kang and Shin (2019) and Behlol and Anwar (2011) reported that secondary school teaching is outcome of examination system, and it heavily requires cramming of materials. The present study identified that the class time is majorly spent on translation and grammar and the rest is

used for learning the comprehension questions and vocabulary meanings in L1. The rote learning is even extended to learning of essays, stories, letters and applications that are asked in exams. The focus, hence, is only passing the exams and not learning the language as goes with the motto of grammar translation method. Grammar translation method means, 'knowing everything about the language but the language (Nawab, 2012; Richards & Rodgers, 2014). The outdated exam system does not support developing reading skill of the English language learners in schools. Keeping in view the examination system, the teachers totally prepare students according to the expected questions in the exam. Young and Ortlieb (2018) enhances the importance of fluency by stating that the learners who lag behind in reading fluency skill are most likely to struggle in middle and high school as English is the medium of instruction. Hence, if the reading fluency improves the language improves overall. Therefore, implementing a reading program to improve reading fluency skill will help students improve in their language exams as well as in overall school studies.

## **Conclusion, Recommendations and Future Research**

The research concludes that classroom practices will only change if the objectives of testing would change. If reading fluency scores are measured as part of examination or yearly learner language progress, only then it will become part of classroom practices. Till that time, still focusing on the reading fluency would improve the English exam results of the students. The research recommends a revolutionary change in the language examination system of Punjab at school level. An exam based on reading comprehension and creative writing would serve the purpose.

The research recommends that structuralists reading practices in Punjab public schools need to be checked and replaced with constructivists techniques so that the situation of English language teaching and learning might improve. Practically, there is no focus on developing reading skill generally and reading fluency particularly in school language teaching and learning. The focus on translation and translation as means of comprehension needs to be discouraged too.

'Only English' reading of the text is found to be the strange concept as it is never done in classrooms. Moreover, no research documents the reading fluency scores of English language learners in Pakistan. Research at government level must be conducted to report the reading fluency scores of the English language learners in schools. The findings of the present study hypothesize that the reading fluency scores of school learners in Punjab might fall short of the target as no reading fluency technique is explicitly used in language classrooms.

The present study recommends that an effective reading program should be implemented in public schools to improve the teaching and learning of English as a second language as one of the major objectives of school education is learning of English language since English is the language of Higher education in Pakistan (Siddiqui, 2007).

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