

Improving English Language Reading Fluency at Elementary Level in Pakistan's Schools

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Abstract

One essential component of reading is fluency that students are required to develop. Previous studies (ASER, 2019; Akram, & Mahmood; 2007, Khan, 2010) highlighted that many school students in Pakistan are unable to read grade appropriate material in English Language. The study reported in this paper was designed to assess the effect of reading activities; Repeated reading, Pair reading and Reading Aloud on elementary students' reading fluency. Using the exploratory paradigm, a small group intervention was planned and delivered to grade four students in a school in Lahore. The selected group was taught with reading activities; paired reading, reading aloud and repeated reading for six weeks. The result was that reading fluency was enhanced considerably for large number of students.

Keywords: Reading fluency; Reading aloud; Paired reading; Repeated reading; Speed; Accuracy; Automaticity and Expression

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Introduction

Reading is a basic tool of learning, and if students do not *learn to read* then it becomes difficult to *read to learn*. Students with poor reading ability tend to fall behind in all academic studies as they cannot comprehend the subject content, placing them at a disadvantage in later life. The achievement gap widens between the students who learn to read and ones who do not, as they grow.

In Pakistan the dropout rate in primary schools is 17% in rural areas and 6% in urban areas (ASER, 2019). These children who drop out from school are less able to contribute to the economy of the county (Akram, & Mahmood, 2007) and very unlikely to realise their potential in life. Akram and Mahmood further stated that in Pakistan the students are not encouraged for making their own efforts to learn language.

ASER report (2019) revealed that only 55% of grade five students were able to read sentences from a grade two English text book. This shows that students are struggling with reading. There are several issues regarding language learning - one is that there are six major language groups in Pakistan. Student learn their mother tongue, then in schools they are required to learn Urdu (a medium for instruction in majority of institutes and National Language as well) then English (an important international language and a target language since the Government has changed instruction in all subjects to the English language from grade one). Therefore, teachers need to be specifically trained in teaching reading in the English language (Khan, 2010).

Fluency is a fundamental component of reading, an essential element of reading alongside comprehension, phonics, vocabulary and phonemic awareness. When students are struggling to read as the ASER report (2019) indicates then they have a fluency problem.

Reading fluency is an important aspect of reading, necessary for children's success in school and for their confidence. Lack of fluency in reading means difficulty

with language in general and such children face hurdles now and in the future (Neuman, Pinkham, & Kaefer, 2013).

Furthermore, children who have not developed a good reading habit struggle socially and academically among their peers. (Anderson, Wilson, & Fielding, 2014). Prominently, reading fluency has been related to reading comprehension. Lebel, Shaywitz, Holahan, Shaywitz, Marchione, & Beaulieu, (2013) note that difficulty in the sphere of reading fluency plays a part in dyslexia and reading speed. Earlier, it was noted that the problems of adult dyslexics are commonly related to reading fluency even for accurate readers, an observation made also by Lefly and Pennington (2001).

Betts (2004) shows that it was very difficult to accomplish developments in fluency for reading in comparison to enhancements in reading grasp, word documentation and decoding skills. Furthermore, there are few studies concerning fluency problems in reading compared with accuracy in reading and in speaking and regarding its significance in improving reading skill (Lefly and Pennington 2001; Brown, Reading, & McDaniel, 2014)).

One reason for this oversight may be the non-availability of uniform and norm-referenced procedures for fluency of reading (Fuchs, Fuchs, Hosp, & Jenkins 2001). A standard definition of “reading fluency” emphasizes the fluent oral reading of large blocks of text (Kuhn, 2004) as compared to reading words or a single sentence. Despite some reading measures are labelled “reading fluency” they are unable to evaluate reading fluency as it is most usefully well-defined.

Techniques applied to develop fluency include paired reading, reading aloud and repeated reading. These all contribute to the development in general speed of reading for children (Beck, 2013). Fluency in reading can progress from reading of simple sentences, through reading lengthy sentences to reading chunks of texts. Improvement in “reading fluency” has proved to make exceptional contribution to reading comprehension (Schwanenflugel, et.al.,2009).

Reading fluency and word reading and are interrelated but are different reading skills and accordingly need to be dealt with separately. Some studies show reading disabilities are more likely to be based on lack of fluency than on word reading (Breen & Drecktrah, 1990)

The objectives of the Research

For this small-scale study undertaken, the objectives were to investigate the outcome of reading activities on the participant elementary students'

- i. reading fluency
- ii.. reading accuracy
- iii. reading automaticity
- iv. reading prosody.

These terms are defined in the literature sections.

Research Hypotheses

Null hypotheses were deployed as these null hypotheses provide a rational framework for testing hypothesis, and provide an accepted resolution for statistical analysis:

1. There is no significant difference in the mean score of pre and post-test of experimental group in reading fluency
2. There is no significant difference in the mean score of pre and post-test of experimental group in reading accuracy
3. There is no significant difference in the mean score of pre and post-test of experimental group in reading automaticity
4. There is no significant difference in the mean score of pre and post-test of experimental group in reading prosody

The significance of the study

It was the aim that the research reported on in this paper might help guide teachers in teaching techniques that can help students to become fluent readers. This study may facilitate teacher training institutes to add fluency in their curriculum. It can help the curriculum developers and text book writers to include fluency in the teaching material. This can help the School education department to initiate teacher training for enhancement of reading and fluency. This study can help to introduce reading culture among students and community. It may provide a guideline about the factors that affect reading fluency and required to be focused in teaching for students at elementary level. It may help to do further studies to improve reading of elementary students.

Delimitation of the Research

The research is delimited to only Lahore City and was carried out in only one elementary level school in Lahore and was a small-scale exploratory study.

Components of Fluency

There are main components of reading fluency; speed, prosody and accuracy (Hasbrouck, & Tindal, 2006). **Speed** is measured words per minutes; readers are required to read at appropriate speed, it is different for different grade levels. Speed reading improves memory, provides better focus on text and increases self confidence in readers as they feel comfortable with reading material (Rayner, Schotter, Masson, Potter, & Treiman, 2016)

Automaticity: In Elementary classes students need to be encouraged to read with automaticity. Automaticity is main goal of fluency and this refers to reading accurately and swiftly. It has two parts decoding of words in text and understanding meaning (Rasinski, 2012; Brown, 2014). It means the complex skill of reading is performed without conscious effort which can be attained by readers' continuous effort of reading.

Accuracy: Accuracy is reading without making mistakes and it is important that students need to know their mistakes to improve their reading (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005). Some learners can face the problem of accurate word reading. Reading with accuracy is important as it facilitates students to focus on meanings and gain comprehension. (Rasinski, 2012). **Prosody:** Kuhn and Stahl, 2000 reports that prosody in reading means the expressiveness of the reader while reading, it is reading with expression that brings the text into live for listeners (Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005).

Frequent read aloud activities provide a base for fluent reading among students. It is quite common for language teachers to read aloud to their students in the classroom. This provides opportunity to students to mimic teachers' reading and improve their reading through reading aloud activity. This is a classical method but still common that first the teacher reads aloud and then students read aloud in the classroom, and it is effective (Hintikka, Landerl, Aro, & Lyytinen, 2008).

In the classroom teachers can prepare a play/skits/ dramas for reading aloud for students as an activity, through these activity students can practice reading aloud. These activities can motivate students to develop fluency and accuracy. Reading in groups and pairs can facilitate speedily and accurate reading. In these activities teachers can observe pronunciation, check speed of reading, prosody, accuracy, etc. (August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005). Children take turns in reading aloud text in the classroom. Student can create their own dramatic situations and then extend them with the help of other students and teachers. They can create their own plays and perform in the classroom (Hintikka, Landerl, Aro, & Lyytinen, 2008).

Fluency can be facilitated by practicing reading in pairs. In this strategy a less fluent reader can be paired with a more fluent reader. Similar ability students can also be paired to re-read an already read story to each other. They can also read a pre-assigned text to each other to help reading. This allows children to take turns and provide feedback to fellow student which help students to improve their fluency and monitor their

comprehension. Student can improve their deficiencies in reading with the help of peers. One can act as a player and other as a coach. The player reads and the coach gives feedback and makes corrections, then they switch their roles after few minutes, so everyone gets a chance to correct others (Hintikka, Landerl, Aro, & Lyytinen, 2008)

A repeated reading strategy can be used to practice reading with the aim to increase oral fluency of students. According to this strategy the students read arranged passage twice or more times and sometimes students keep reading until the required level of fluency is achieved (Begeny, Krouse, Ross, & Mitchell, 2009). In this strategy the teacher selects for students a text passage of fifty to two hundred words which they can read with difficulty and repeat to achieve a level where their reading become fluent and error free. This can be applied to the group or individual. Positive results of using repeated reading activities have been noted and showed significant improvement in reading fluency (Betts, 2004; Begeny, Krouse, Ross, & Mitchell, 2009).

Method

This research was designed to evaluate the effect of reading activities on reading fluency of elementary students, in the context of small-scale exploratory research. A small group intervention was used which was possible for the class teachers to carry out. A method of pre-test and post-test was applied to enhance potential validity. An already formed group was randomly selected.

Intervention

Intervention was planned for use with a group in a private school in Lahore. Peer reading, Repeated reading and Reading aloud activities were used. The intervention was applied by the researchers in 40 minutes' period of English class for six weeks and for five days a week. Two activities were focused in one class for 15 minutes each.

Monday	Peer reading and Repeated reading
Tuesday	Reading aloud and Repeated reading
Wednesday	Peer reading and Reading aloud

Thursday	Repeated reading and Peer reading
Friday	Repeated reading and Reading aloud

Population and Sample

The population of the research was Elementary school's students from a private school in Lahore. For this study 24 4th grade students were chosen for pre-test and post-test method. The selected group comprised 24 students consisting of 12 males and 12 females.

Instrumentation

Punjab Text book of English of Grade 4 was used to read passages. The students' reading was recorded to check fluency, accuracy, automaticity and expression.

Data collection

Data were collected from the school students personally by the researchers. Permission was granted from the school principal and head teacher and the ethical consideration were kept in mind while collecting data. The researcher applied the techniques of reading aloud, pair reading and repeated reading in intact group of the 4th grade class.

Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were calculated; means of pre-test and post-test were compared by applying t-test to find out if intervention has made any difference in reading fluency.

Analysis and clarification of Data

Table 1

Fluency pre and post test

Fluency	N	Mean	SD	df	T	Sig
Pre test	24	69.1667	14.69595	46	-3.499	.001
Post test	24	83.6667	14.00828			

Table reveals that the null hypothesis regarding no significant difference between pre-test and post-test mean score, of experimental group in reading fluency is rejected. The results show that the significant difference existed in score of pre-test (M=69.1667, SD= 14.69595) and post-test (M= 83.6667, SD= 14.00828, $t(-3.499)$, $p < .05$).

Table 2

Accuracy pre and post-test

Accuracy	N	Mean	SD	df	T	Sig
Pre test	24	64.3333	16.36982	46	-3.646	.001
Post test	24	79.4167	11.94886			

Table reveals that the null hypothesis regarding no significant difference between pre-test and post-test mean score, of experimental group in reading accuracy is rejected. The results show that the significant modification existed in scores of pre-test (M= 64.3333, SD= 16.36982) and post-test (M= 79.4167, SD=11.94886; $t(-3.646)$, $p < .05$).

Table 3

Automaticity pre and post-test

Automaticity	N	Mean	SD	df	T	Sig
Pre test	24	66.2917	15.06934	46	-3.020	.004
Post test	24	78.6250	13.15728			

Table reveals that the null hypothesis regarding no significant difference between pre-test and post-test mean score, of experimental group in reading automaticity is

rejected. The results show that the significant modification existed in scores of pre-test (M= 66.2917, SD= 15.06934) and post-test (M= 78.6250, SD=13.15728; $t(-3.020)$, $p < .05$).

Table 4

Prosody pre-test and post-test

Prosody	N	Mean	SD	df	T	Sig
Pre test	24	60.1250	21.48268	46	-2.091	.042
Post test	24	72.2083	18.44376			

Table reveals that the null hypothesis regarding no significant difference between pre-test and post-test mean score, of experimental group in reading prosody is rejected. The results show that th significant difference existed in scores of pre-test (M= 60.1250, SD= 18.48268) and post-test (M= 72.2083, SD=18.44376; $t(-2.091)$, $p < .05$).

Findings

Based on data analysis, the findings of the study are as following.

Research Hypothesis 1:

The null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the mean score of pre and post-test of experimental group in reading fluency is rejected. The results revealed that there was significant difference in score of pre-test (M=69.1667, SD= 14.69595) and post-test (M= 83.6667, SD= 14.00828, $t(-3.499)$, $p < .05$) the conclusion is that there is a significant difference between pre- and post-test.

Research Hypothesis 2:

The null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the mean score of pre and post-test of experimental group in reading accuracy is rejected. The results revealed that there was a significant modification in scores of pre-test (M= 64.3333, SD=

16.36982) and post-test ($M= 79.4167$, $SD=11.94886$; $t (-3.646)$, $p= <.05$). There is significance difference between the score of the pre-test and post-test.

Research Hypothesis 3:

The null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the mean score of pre and post-test of experimental group in reading automaticity is rejected. The results revealed that there was significant modification in scores of pre-test ($M= 66.2917$, $SD= 15.06934$) and post-test ($M= 78.6250$, $SD=13.15728$; $t (-3.020)$, $p= <.05$). The score of pre and post-test has significance difference.

Research Hypothesis 4:

The null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the mean score of pre and post-test of experimental group in reading prosody is rejected. The results revealed that there was significant difference in scores of pre-test ($M= 60.1250$, $SD= 18.48268$) and post-test ($M= 72.2083$, $SD=18.44376$; $t (-2.091)$, $p= <.05$). The score of pre and post-test has significance difference.

From the findings, the conclusion was that students reading fluency ability was enhanced significantly by reading activities. It was revealed from the results of post test showed that students mean scores on fluency, accuracy, automaticity and prosody were better than pre test scores. And the difference was statistically significant. Thus it is concluded that reading activities had positive effect on students' reading ability.

Discussion

In the pre-test most of the students scored low results but in the post-test reading fluency was significantly improved, as was accuracy, automaticity and expression. Therefore, if the fluency activities are performed in the classrooms then the students can gain fluency in reading and have positive effect in their academic performance. The results confirm the results of previous studies (Fuchs, 2001; Hudson, Lane, & Pullen, 2005; Rasinski, 2012; Rayner, Schotter, Masson, Potter, & Treiman, 2016).

Recommendations

- This study should be replicated in more schools in more locations, including public elementary schools
- Subsequent studies could be conducted to include a wider range of instructional strategies
- Further studies can be conducted to include teachers interviews on their own current practices and the impact of the new strategies on their practice and to tease out the implications for teacher education and training.
- The teacher education institutions need to include reading specific activities and techniques in their curriculum.
- During pre-service training the institutions require to provide more practice teaching in developing reading activities in primary students.
- The studies can be conduct to look at the effect of reading and fluency on academic performance of other subjects.

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