

Gender Variations in Academic Reading Comprehension Among Secondary School Students in Karachi

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Abstract

The study was designed to assess and evaluate reading comprehension of secondary school students of Karachi in both government and private sector. Reading tests were conducted for 100 boys and 100 girls at secondary level and their score were compared to find out differences and correlation. Two questionnaires were also designed to find out practices and problems of reading comprehension. The data was analyzed and results revealed that there is a marked difference between the scores of students and practices of teachers for teaching of reading. Based on findings suitable recommendations were made.

Keywords: Reading Comprehension, English Language Teaching in Pakistan, Problems while reading English

Introduction

Reading comprehension of English language is important because of importance given to English language itself by various world communities. It is a rich, flexible, elegant and dignified language which is universally popular (Shamsi, 2006, p. 7) Approximately 375 million people are those whose first language is English while the number of non-native speakers of English according to estimation varies between 470 million to over a billion (Curtis, 2006, p. 192). English is spoken or read in the world for a number of reasons which include historical, political, and economic. It is the language of trade, travel and technology as well (Wrenn, 2006, p. 6). It is widely learnt as foreign or second language and while learning students face a number of difficulties. Researchers suggest learning to read a language is one of the best ways to increase proficiency of a particular language (Krashen, 1993). Extended, free voluntary reading and sustained independent reading develop reading comprehension and help learners in writing, vocabulary development, mastery over spelling, and also grammatical development (Asraf & Ahmad, 2003). Present study was carried out with an aim to investigate practice and developing of reading comprehension of English language in Secondary Schools in Karachi registered with Sindh Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education and to suggest suitable measures for the identified problems.

Review of Related Literature

In Pakistani schools, only reading and writing skills are emphasized while teaching of English while listening and speaking skills are ignored in classroom as well as in examination system. Ironically, Pakistani students are not good in reading or writing and most of them consider English as a very difficult language. English from early classes is taught in private schools mostly

with emphasis on speaking and listening with less stress or secondary importance to reading and writing (Ahmad – Khurram, 2001).

In Pakistan, trend for book reading is declining and Internet is very popular. Books are read in soft copies or e – books (“Book reading is declining in youth of Pakistan”, August 8, 2008). In schools, untrained teachers explain the text either in Urdu, which is national language or any of the regional or provincial languages. Teachers usually do not know the fact that understanding a text means to extract what is the message conveyed by the writer and for that purpose background knowledge as well as linguistic clues are important. In schools, mostly grammar or vocabulary is taught (ibid.).

Importance of Reading Comprehension in Second Language Learning

It is very important that if somebody is learning a language, he also learn to read it, as for developing command over a language, reading is necessary. Learners develop understanding of basic structure and vocabulary and enjoy reading on topics, which interest them. Contextual meaning and grammatical structures are even better understood by those readers who have attained relatively better level of understanding of a language. Such readers expand their vocabulary when read extensively (Devis, 2008). Purpose of reading in native language is different from purpose of reading in target language as in that it is to teach the language itself in the classroom. So vocabulary and structures of target language, for example, can be taught and learnt in classroom reading activities (Nuttall, 1982, p. 19).

Impact of Reading on Other Language Skills

Language has two groups of skills - receptive and productive. Reading and listening are in the first category while speaking and writing fall in the other (Lucantoni, 2001, p. 4). Practicing any of the skill ultimately improves a learner’s comprehension of what he reads. To be accurate and have power of expression, practice in writing is important which improves reading comprehension. Language is also learnt when talking and listening so improvement in speaking improves the writing in that language also. Vocabulary is learnt in everyday life where variety of experiences enhances it. All this ultimately helps in understanding of written language and a learner gradually becomes a good reader. Learning to listen, speak, then read and write is natural sequence of a language. Global need today is to be fluent in speaking and proficient in listening for effective communication, yet importance of reading is not minimized but increased manifold. Adequately learnt reading is essential for learning of speaking, listening and writing (Fry, 1965, p. 127).

Successful study and acquisition rely on reading (Harmer, 1998, p. 68). Extensive reading helps in maximum vocabulary acquisition (Pigada & Schmitt, 2006). ESL learners can write English through reading even if they speak no English at all (Hudelson, 1984). If learners are taught listening skills to train them to be active listeners to be successful in studies as well as in real world, it is possible through reading. Each time reading is taught, learners develop they learn listening skills as well as the mechanics of reading (“Teaching children listening through reading”, June 3, 2008). Moreover, when reading is carried out in the classroom, it helps to develop pronunciation and makes students fluent as well. Students also learn to be expressive while speaking (Nuttall, 1982, p. 2). as a matter of fact, loud reading is very important at least from the beginning of language learning till two or three years. Likewise, a good selection of reading

material results in stimulating interest, imaginative thinking, and positive discussions (Harmer, 1998, p. 68).

For speaking assignments given by the class teacher, the learners have to study a particular topic in detail, which improves listening, and speaking abilities along with thinking process as well. Students also take interest what others have to say on a particular topic and this makes them better listeners (Sewjee, 2001, p. 23). Reading provides ideas for writing and opportunities to learn vocabulary, grammatical constructions, and construction of sentences, paragraphs, and texts (Harmer, 1998, p. 68). Without reading, many goals that have been set by a learner cannot be achieved in terms of gaining information to be a better writer or speaker of a particular language (Sewjee, 2008, p.23). A marked improvement in the performance of the experimental subjects is seen in extensive readers especially in terms of their writing skills (Hafiz & Tudor, 1989). A learner who is learning to develop writing skill may not be able to write well on a particular topic if s/he has not been able to read relevant material on that particular topic (Addison, n.d).

Barriers to Reading Comprehension

The major difficulties in reading comprehension have been identified by various researchers and can be summed up as follows:

1. Unfamiliar scripts, writing systems, and unfamiliar cultural material, low language proficiency, and many irrational beliefs cause anxiety (Deutsch, 2005).
2. Many ESL learners have processing difficulties, which result in avoiding reading (ibid.).
3. The material selected for reading, if difficult, also blocks the way to comprehension (Hagboldt, 1925, p. 297).
4. Lack of background knowledge creates problems in understanding figurative meaning, cultural stance, and meaningful connection of the text to the lives of learners (Readence, Bean & Baldwin, 1985).
5. Dyslexia disorder also causes difficulty in reading and spelling (Wren, 2002). Unfortunately, in a country like Pakistan, a dyslexic student is taken as stupid or lazy and very less or no attention is given to the dyslexic problem in general in educational set up as well as at home (Wasti, 2008).
6. Hyperlexia means to be able to read rapidly but understanding nothing. A hyperlexic child is master of reading single words but this is very rarely found disorder (“Hyperlexia”, 2009).
7. Garden – Variety is yet another reading disorder in which a reader faces difficulties in decoding text or cannot understand what is spoken to (ibid).
8. Sometimes language teachers also cannot understand the reason behind insufficient reading development and any problem related to learning disability (Deutsch, 2005).
9. Lack of reading quantity in classrooms and the fact that extensive reading is not used in many classrooms also is a barrier to reading comprehension (ibid.).
10. There may be individual differences which Handschin (1919, p.161) highlighted suggesting dividing the class into two ability groups of fast and slow learners.
11. While reading the punctuation marks can also become a hindrance to understand meaning (Watkins, 1973, p. 52).
12. Spelling also confuses because English is a non-phonetic language, for the students to understand a reading text (Mustehsan, 2008, p. 21).

13. Wrong beliefs about development, instructions, process, and learning to read also hinder proper learning to read Wren (2002).
14. If students or teachers lack of motivation, strong chances are there that language development will be affected (Nuttall, 1982, p. 3).
15. 'Aliterate' is a person who is good in native language reading but intentionally avoids reading. Such persons also face extreme problems when learning a foreign language (Deutsch, 2005).

Gender Effects on Reading in Pakistan

Girls and boys in Pakistani society especially in middle and lower class families have roles quite different from each others. As a result, they also choose different fields of studies and even during studies they have to work without any tuitions, guidance or help from others. Moreover, they have to do household chores and consequently, they find themselves too exhausted to study. Even if they do want to pursue studies, they face a number of unfavorable circumstances. Parents think that girls' first duty is to be a master in household chores, as they have to be good homemakers ultimately. This results in lack of motivation in girls also (Victor, 2006).

It is however ironical that girl students in Pakistan still get positions in most of the exams especially in matriculation. Girls in Pakistan have lesser access to schools when compared with boys and this is one of the biggest educational problems of Pakistan. There are a number of problems, which have led to failure in ensuring equal opportunities for girls and boys when it comes to seeking education in schools. The budgets are not sufficiently allocated, the female teachers are short, social environment is not conducive, girls have a restricted movement and many other factors affect female education in Pakistan. In fact, situation of women in Pakistan is not good with respect to education. Women have a very low trend to join school and their dropouts before completing primary education is high. They are usually deprived of higher education and good jobs as a result (Wahab, 2008, p. 21).

An analysis of contents of five English language textbooks¹, reveals that not only illustrations but dialogs also promoted gender discrimination and stereotyping with respect to boys and girls. Their attributes and professions were clearly distinct in these books as well. Analysis of this data showed that women were very less present in illustrations while men were given more space. Men were wearing conventional and modern dresses while women were wearing only conventional. Men had active roles in the society and professions like doctors, engineers were occupied by them while women were mostly limited to roles of nurses or teachers only or doing household chores only. No female role model was presented in the books for girl students to follow. The language also carried linguistic bias which means that for men there were more dialogs than women and they mostly played the roles of initiators and respondents respectively. It may be concluded that such gender bias might affect learning of the girls as if a role play is done in the classroom, female students would be getting fewer chances because of the fact that dialogues available for them are not much longer and are lesser than those of boys (ibid.).

To promote education among girl students, curricula designers need to consider a gender fair policy. Contents of books needs to be carefully analyzed before implementation and teachers as well as teaching material developers must be instructed to deal gender discrimination with care. If necessary, teachers training must be held on gender issues and their social roles and jobs must be defined with respect to considering both genders. (ibid.)

Research Methodology

During the study, two reading comprehension tests were conducted. One was cloze test and the other one was a multiple-choice test. After conduct of tests, their scores were compared through t-testⁱⁱ and Pearson Product Coefficient Correlation (r) to find out differences and correlation. Data of two questionnaires, which were conducted with English teachers and their students, was also analyzed to find out the problems that result in improper development of reading comprehension on part of the students.

Composition of the Samples: From various government and private sector schools of Karachi Board, 20 schools were randomly selectedⁱⁱⁱ to conduct these tests. From 10th grade of these schools, 100 boys and 100 girls were selected as population sample. 100 teachers were also part of the sample.

Instruments: For present study, two instruments were used. One was Reading Text which students were supposed to read and then solve two tests based on that text. The other instrument was questionnaire for students as well as for their English language teachers. The tests were cloze test in which a paragraph was given with every seventh word to be guessed by students and the other test was reading comprehension test in which ten multiple-choice questions were given. Rules to read the text and solve the tests were clearly explained. The two questionnaires, which were designed to identify reading practices and associated problems had five variables each and for each variable five questions were designed.

Results

The groups of students for reading comprehension scores were compared based on gender and sector. Therefore, in this way four groups i.e. Boys vs. Girls, Government vs. Private, Government Boys vs. Private Boys and Government Girls vs. Private Girls. Questionnaire data for teachers as well as for students was also compared based on sector and gender.

A. Statistical Difference between Scores of Students (Table 1)

Calculated t-value remained lesser than the table value, at 0.05 level of significance, for boys and girls reading comprehension score, but it remained greater for government and private students and for Government and Private Boys and Girls as well. Therefore, it is concluded that a statistically significant difference between the performances of government and private students is present. Overall performance of private students in each category remained significantly better than the performance of government students.

B. Statistical Correlation between Boys and Girls Students (Table 2)

As calculated t – value remained lesser than table value for each category mentioned in table 2; it is evident that no significant correlation was observed for reading comprehension scores of the boy and girl students or government and private students.

Analysis of Questionnaire Data: During the current study, two questionnaires were administered. The details (Table 3) are as follows:

Questionnaire for English Teachers: The data calculated from questionnaire (Table 4) highlighted that reading is considered very important by secondary schools teachers irrespective of their gender or sector. However, high score in reading comprehensive tests were considered important for female teachers of government sectors however all female teachers told that teaching reading through various strategies is found helpful in improves reading comprehension of English language. Teachers were found less motivated to teach reading particularly due to their workload and mostly teachers recorded that students were also less motivated. Various good techniques were found in private sector teachers such as sharing of their personal reading experience and recommended books for reading or use supportive language techniques to motivate or teach their students. Facilities for teaching of reading particularly are not found sufficient however; teachers in private schools used other language skills to integrate while teaching reading to cover deficiency of training facilities. Parent teacher meetings were found with more frequency to discuss progress of students in private schools. They also have regular meetings with parents. Teachers or both government and private sectors stressed upon their own training through conduct of workshops and seminars to improve their teaching style.

Questionnaire for Students: the data collected from questionnaire (Table 4) revealed that private students gave maxim importance to reading comprehension and they told that their teachers used various techniques to teach them reading as a result private students were found more motivated towards reading in and outside classroom than government students were. As compared to government students, private sector students found their teachers more concerned about regularity and punctuality and helping in case of a problem in reading or motivation. . Students of private teachers are frequently exposed to reading tests and therefore they are less anxious than government students are while attempting exams. For parents- teacher meeting frequency and results feedback response of private students remained better than government students. However, government students opined that they could not perform better without tuition.

Conclusion

After comparing various groups, it was concluded that private secondary school students' performance is generally and significantly better than government students in reading comprehension. However, their scores do not correlate significantly. Likewise, practices of teachers in private sector are much better than in government sector. Language teachers usually are overburdened and students also lack motivation for reading extensively, however, private teachers manage to motivate their students through a number of techniques and better availability of reading material and training aids. Yet at the end, students think tuition is compulsory for them to qualify. However, private students experience less anxiety for exams and tests as their teacher expose them to classroom tests frequently.

Recommendations

Based on findings, following are recommended for solution of reading comprehension problems observed during this research study:

1. The factor that matters most in developing reading comprehension is Motivation on part of secondary school students as well as English teachers. It should be given importance and teachers through training and workshop should be educated to motivate their students for developing reading skill.
2. Workload of teachers who teach English and others should be balanced based on rationalized distribution so that English teacher do not feel overburdened and teach their students with required level of motivation and enthusiasm.
3. Various reading strategies, which have been found successful so far, should be adopted in classroom and curriculum for developing reading skill in secondary students such as SSR, Extensive reading, integration of other language skills, etc.
4. Separate teachers for reading may be appointed in secondary schools for inculcating reading habits in students.
5. While designing curriculum and deciding about teaching methodology, conduct of reading sessions should be given consideration at secondary level. For teachers as well as for students necessity of extensive reading should be emphasized and highlighted through workshops and special lessons.
 - a. It was observed during this research that not only private students scored better than government students did but teaching methods and motivational techniques used by private teachers are far better than government teachers are. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that government teachers should also follow motivational techniques, counseling of their students, testing and examining methods and other practices, which private teachers do on frequent basis.
 - b. Training material and training aids for teaching reading including books in library should be made available to government teachers and students also because private schools were found relatively well equipped with these during the research.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, it is recommended that other language skills may also be evaluated comparing various groups of students to find out which group performs better in other skills.

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Table 1 - t-test for Reading Comprehension Scores of Students

Category	N	Mean	S.D	T
Boys	100	16.33	6.22	*-0.01
Girls	100	16.34	5.52	
Government	100	12.15	4.7106	**-14.42
Private	100	20.52	3.3948	
Government Boys	50	11.6	4.4813	**-11.7545
Private Boys	50	21.06	3.5075	
Government Girls	50	12.70	4.9125	**- 8.7616
Private Girls	50	19.98	3.2229	

* > 0.05

** < 0.05

Table 2 - Pearson Product Moment Co-relation Co-efficient for Reading Comprehension Scores of Students

Category	N	Mean	S.D	r	t
Boys	100	16.33	6.22	0.7051	*.6996
Girls	100	16.34	5.52		
Government	100	12.15	4.7106	0.152	*0.1502
Private	100	20.52	3.3948		
Government Boys	50	11.6	4.4813	0.121	*0.1185
Private Boys	50	21.06	3.5075		
Government Girls	50	12.70	4.9125	0.127	*0.1234
Private Girls	50	19.98	3.9992		

* >0.05

Table 3– Description of Questionnaires

Variables	Variable 1	Variable 2	Variable 3	Variable 4	Variable 5
Titles	Importance of Reading	Motivation and Reading	Facilities and Teaching Methodology	Testing of Reading	Results
Items	Item 1-5	Item 6-10	Item 11-15	Item 16-20	Item 21-25

Table 4 - Mean Scores Comparison

S No	Variables	Teachers				Students			
		Government		Private		Government		Private	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
1.	Importance of Reading	3.18	3.19	2.86	3.4	2.81	3.02	3.08	2.92
2.	Motivation and Reading	3.65	3.46	3.32	3.18	3.08	3.12	3.1	2.79
3.	Facilities & Teaching Methodology	1.31	1.31	2.01	2.1	2.77	2.57	2.66	2.86
4.	Reading Comprehension Testing	1.96	2.11	2.43	2.47	2.9	3.26	2.68	2.68
5.	Results	2.81	2.88	3.74	3.24	3.52	3.55	2.96	4.9
Grand Total		2.582	2.59	2.872	2.878	3.016	3.104	2.89	3.23

ⁱ Class I to Class V; these books were prepared by Sindh Textbook Board and also produced by them; these were prescribed for provincial schools by Education Department. Curriculum Wing of Federal Ministry of Education reviewed these books.

ⁱⁱ For independent samples

ⁱⁱⁱ These schools were selected from five different districts of Karachi on socio economic basis. From each district 4 schools were selected, two from private and two from government sector.