

Impact of Reading Strategies on Reading of Kindergarten and Nursery Students: A Case Study

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Abstract: *Developing reading and literacy skills is a serious concern for Pakistan. Researchers have identified many reasons for students' problems in reading and literacy. The purpose of this research to find the impact of the following reading strategies on Kindergarten and Nursery students reading and fluency: a) phonemic awareness, b) Phonics, c) sight reading, d) guided reading and e) shared reading. The study also sought to find the perception of teachers regarding the impact of reading strategies on student reading and fluency. Two sections of kindergarten and nursery and four teachers of DHA school system comprised the sample population for this case study. Reading assessment of students was done using reading assessment and interviews of teachers were done to explore their perceptions. The results of this study indicated that the use of different reading strategies improves the phonics, phoneme awareness, sight reading of more than 90% of students. The students had problems with decoding pictures and comprehension. Teachers had positive perception about the use of different strategies to improve student reading and comprehension. Teachers need to be trained to improve comprehension skills and to develop vocabulary of students in English.*

Key Words: *Reading strategies; Kindergarten and Nursery; Private school system; Reading skills; Perception of teachers.*

Introduction

Reading is a basic skill that students need to learn in order to progress from one grade to the next. Reading problems is a serious concern for Pakistan, according to a report published by ASER (2011), 63% of grade 3 and 54% of grade 5 public school students cannot read a sentence in their local language. The first reason for the low reading achievement is the use of six regional languages in addition to the national language Urdu in public schools of Pakistan (USAID Reading Project Report, 2011). According to a report published by UNESCO, the literacy rate in Pakistan is 55% and it is at 160th in total countries of the world. Pakistan aimed to achieve the literacy rate of 88% by 2015.

Universal illiteracy mandate places emphasis on high level literacy skills and practices and it is considered as an important component for educational institutions around the world. Literacy skills are a requirement for higher education and are needed to achieve better living standards (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Low literacy rates are a concern for policy makers and educators around the world as the success of the country depends upon the skillset of the future generation (NCLB). In Pakistan Urdu and English both are considered to be official languages though there is some controversy over English as the official language (Rahman, 2006). In public and private schools, English is taught as a compulsory subject starting from grade 1. There is concern over the quality of English teaching in Pakistan. Different factors are responsible for the problems in English language teaching and some factors have been identified in studies done by Hassan (2009) and Warsi (2004). The identified factors are: a) weak curriculum, b) unclear objectives in English courses, c) lack of experience of teachers, d) inappropriate teaching methods, e) unsuitable textbooks, f) insufficient materials and detrimental learning environment, g) flawed examination system, h) too many students in classrooms, i) lack of motivation to learn English, j) absence of library and reading material.

A large number of private schools in Pakistan realizing the importance of English language learning have developed curriculum and are providing training to train teachers in English language teaching. It is imperative for early year's educators to introduce a comprehensive curriculum that supports the multifarious strategies to enhance children's reading, writing, listening and speaking abilities. Research in reading in English as a second language is used to bring changes in reading instruction (Grabe & Stoller, 2002). Research in reading in English is nonexistent in the context of Pakistan even though English is taught as a compulsory subject from the first grade. Research in reading instruction has not been given due importance and consideration (Muhammad, 2011). This study will explore the implementation and effectiveness of the following reading strategies being used by teachers of Kindergarten and Nursery of DHA school system in English literacy instruction to develop comprehension, accuracy and fluency of children: a) phonemic awareness, b) Phonics, c) sight reading, d) guided reading and e) shared reading.

The research questions of this study are:

- 1) What is the effect of implementation of different reading strategies (Phonic teaching, phonemic awareness, sight reading, guided and shared reading) on the students' reading proficiency?
- 2) What are the perceptions of teacher's about the impact of different strategies on students reading proficiency?

Review of Literature

The US Congress set up the National Reading Panel (NRP) in 1997 to conduct research on the effectiveness of various reading approaches being used while teaching children to read. The reading strategies considered beneficial by NRP are: a) phonemic awareness, b) phonics, c) fluency, d) vocabulary, and e) comprehension. Teacher preparation and the use of combination of reading strategies are vital if children are to develop as fluent readers and it will also help to overcome problems in literacy (Alldred & Edwards, 2000; Halstead, 2002).

Clay (2002) advocated that children need to use a combination of effective strategies in kindergarten to overcome the problems they may be facing in reading. Reading fluency is also a concern for developed countries like US. The results of National Assessment of Education Progress showed that forty percent of third graders scored below the basic level of reading (Learning First Alliance, 1998). Some factors that lead to low literacy skills are low socioeconomic backgrounds and lack of exposure to literacy before kindergarten (Learning First Alliance, 1998). Students in private schools of Pakistan who enroll in kindergarten have varied experiences before their enrollment in school. Socioeconomic background and lack of exposure to literacy in preschool are considered key factors that may put children at a disadvantage when they enroll in school (Snow, Burns and Griffin, 1998).

Studies are missing on the entry level of kindergarten students in Pakistan. A longitudinal study of Kindergarten batch of 1998 – 1999 was done in US on 19,000 kindergarten students when they enroll in school (West, Denton and Germino-Hausken, 2000). The results of the study showed that 18% of students did not know that they read from left to right when reading English, go from top to bottom and did not know when the story had ended. 34% could not identify the letters of alphabets. The risk factors were identified as low education level of parents, low socioeconomic background and parents having a different first language than English.

Reading is a predictor of later success in school due to its emphasis on comprehension as it is a requirement for all subject areas that students comprehend what they read (Sousa, 2001). This places emphasis on teachers teaching Kindergarten to choose a combination of different reading strategies. This study will focus on the utilization of five reading strategies by teachers to evaluate their effectiveness.

The first reading strategy is Phonemic Awareness. It is an important strategy and it is a part of the standards of English teaching in all the states of United States and it is also an important area of teacher training programs (Yopp & Yopp, 2000). It is defined as the awareness that speech has a sequence of sounds called phonemes, which is the smallest unit of sound (Yopp & Yopp, 2000). Researchers have found that the ability of the learner to sound out words affects the processing of the brain to process information (Sousa 2001, Jensen 1995). Phonics is the next step of a reading program (NRP, 2000). NRP recommend using phonics instruction in kindergarten as it helps to develop reading skills of students in kindergarten and it is also helpful

for students having problems in reading. Children who do not learn to decode the alphabets cannot start reading (NRP). The main purpose of phonics is to teach students to do word analysis to understand the text.

Sight reading is very important as it helps the children to read fluently and enables them to read with speed, accuracy and expression. According to the report of NRP (2000), “fluency is one of several critical factors necessary for reading comprehension” (p.11). Oral reading helps to develop fluency of students and guided reading is a useful strategy to practice oral reading in class under the guidance of a teacher. The feedback of teacher in guided reading helps to develop fluency of children (NRP). With the increased frequency of practice, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension of students improve (Cunningham and Allington, 1999). For guided reading, Clay (2002) suggested that the preferred reading approach is when the teacher reads aloud and students follow the text with their fingers. In shared reading, the teacher reads the story aloud with rhythm, sounds and feelings while students listen to the story. Children can also start reading with the teacher while she is reading the text. This also helps to develop fluency of children (Clay, 2002).

The teacher has a central role in providing literacy experiences to students. If the teacher believes that formal reading instruction should not start in kindergarten then students cannot learn to read. A survey was done by Cooper (2007) to find out the beliefs of kindergarten teachers about teaching students to read. The results of the survey showed that 33% teachers believed that students should not be taught to read at this level. Perception of teachers will play an important role in the strategies that teachers use to teach students to read as well as the implementation of formal reading instruction. Hence a mix of different reading strategies as well as the positive attitude of teachers is important to develop reading skills of kindergarten students.

Methodology

According to Yin (2009), a case study is useful when looking at everyday experiences and school performances. “Case study research includes detailed regarding the type of data that will be gathered, research questions, analysis of how to examine the case, and how the data will be used once it has been collected and analyzed” (Yin, 2009). This research is a case study of teaching strategies being used by Kindergarten and Nursery teachers teaching in DHA school system. Data will be collected by doing interview of teachers to find out their perception regarding the impact of reading strategies on student reading proficiency. Assessment will be done of students to assess their proficiency in different reading skills. Two teachers of kindergarten and all the 30 students that they are teaching and two teachers of nursery and all the 30 students that they are teaching will comprise the sample population for this case study. Students will be assessed on the reading records by teachers.

Findings

An analysis of students' results indicates that that 27% of the students are at the emergent stage and 73% are proficient in pictures reading skills. Picture reading indicates the vocabulary of the students in describing pictures in English. All the students have good phonic skills and only 7% of students are still struggling with blending and segmenting. Approximately 92% of students are proficient in reading sight words and only 7% are falling in the category of students who skills are still at the emergent stage. Reading proficiency is developed in more than 90% of students as indicated by the results mentioned above but few students have developed the comprehension skills. When checked on comprehension skills 33% of students could comprehend what they read and 67% were at the emergent level.

All the teachers mentioned in the interview that they use a combination of different strategies to develop reading skills of students. All the teachers pointed to the value of using pictures to introduce the characters and story to the readers and mentioned that pictures work like clues for the students, for understanding the events of the story of the reader. The teachers mentioned that after introduction of the title and characters, Phonics and Sight reading strategies are used by teachers for reading difficult words and sight reading of words of words that are not decodable is done by teachers. For a whole week the new phonic and sight words are read daily, to develop students' automaticity skills. The participants also conveyed that a systematic program and daily reading practice make children accurate and fluent readers. Teachers were of the perception that by using multiple strategies, daily practice, and use of variety of resources e.g. flash cards, picture cards, and the sentences strips, making reading experience interesting and motivating for the students. Teachers were of the perception that guided reading helps the students who are having problems in reading and one teacher mentioned that she used guided reading to tell stories and to introduce new words. The results of the interviews of teachers indicate that teachers have a positive perception regarding the use of different strategies to develop reading fluency and comprehension of students.

Discussion

As already mentioned Urdu and English are now considered to be official languages of Pakistan. Even though English is taught as a compulsory subject from grade 1, there is a concern about the quality of teaching English in Pakistan. This study explored the perception of teachers regarding the use of different strategies to develop reading skills and the reading skills of students were also evaluated.

The results of the students indicate that students have problem in picture decoding or picture reading skills as it requires a certain level of English vocabulary by students. The factors identified for low literacy skills of student in the US are low socio economic background and

lack of exposure to literacy in preschool and these factors may be the reason for student's problems in decoding pictures.

The results also show that students are proficient in phonics, phonemic awareness and sight reading so students have developed the reading skills. However students are struggling with comprehension and 33% of the students could comprehend what they read. Comprehension is a very important skill as it is requirement for all subject areas that students comprehend what they read (Sousa, 2001). "Fluency is one of the critical factors for reading comprehension" (NRP 2000, p.11). The students in this study are fluent in reading hence they have the prerequisite skills to develop comprehension. The reading strategies being used by the teachers of this study are: a) phonemic awareness, b) phonics, c) sight reading, d) guided reading and e) shared reading. The reading strategies considered beneficial by NRP are: a) phonemic awareness, b) phonics, c) fluency, d) vocabulary and e) comprehension. The teachers of the school try to develop vocabulary and comprehension of students while using the different strategies especially guided reading and shared reading as indicated in their interviews. Vocabulary and Comprehension however are not listed as independent strategies by the teachers of the school system and this may be the reason for students' problems with vocabulary and comprehension. When teaching phonics, the teachers of the school system do not focus on understanding the text; however, NRP has indicated that the main purpose of teaching students to do word analysis is to help the students to understand the text.

As indicated in the review of literature, perception of teachers also plays a very important role in developing reading skills of students. The teachers of the school system have a positive perception about the development of reading skills in kindergarten students and are employing a variety of strategies for this purpose.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The students of kindergarten and nursery have fluency in reading as they have developed phonics, phoneme awareness and sight reading skills. Teachers are using varied strategies to develop these skills in students. However, comprehension is either not the focus on shared and guided reading or students are facing problems in it due to their socioeconomic background and because English is not the first language at home.

The results of this study will be valuable for teachers as the study clearly indicates the skills that have been developed and also the skills that need to be developed. The schools needs to include vocabulary and comprehension as the main strategies as mentioned by NRP rather than including shared and guided reading as the main strategies. The focus on these two strategies by stating it specifically will also to develop these skills in students. It is encouraging that students have developed the fluency in reading which is a requirement for comprehension. Picture decoding

also requires English vocabulary and as already stated since it is not listed as the main strategy hence teachers are not focusing on it specifically. Professional development of teachers with a focus on comprehension strategies may also help to teachers to use strategies to develop comprehension skills in students.

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