

A Study to Investigate Students' Reading Difficulties at Elementary Level

Saqib Shahzad^{*}, Hukamdad^{**} & Jan Alam^{*}

Abstract

The current study probes into the students' reading difficulties at elementary level. The objectives of the study were, to diagnose reading difficulties of the students at elementary level, to identify the role of vocabulary in the reading skill, the importance of grammar in reading skill, the importance of speed in reading skill and the role of spelling and pronunciation in reading skill. All government elementary schools class 8th students (4214) in District Mardan were selected as population of the study, out of which 1054 students were selected through simple random sampling techniques for the collection of data. Self-made reading test and check list were applied for the collection of data. The collected data was categorical and was analyzed through Frequency, Percent, Valid Percent and Cumulative Percent. It was found that majority of the students who could not read well were weak in vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, grammar and speed reading. Moreover, the study suggested that if teachers and stakeholders focus on students' vocabulary, spelling, grammar, pronunciation and reading speed then they can easily solve the problem of difficulties in reading skill.

Keywords: Reading skills, vocabulary, spelling, pronunciation, reading speed, grammar Skill.

* Abdul Wali Khan University, Mardan

** NUML University, Islamabad

Background of the study

Reading is a skill in which a reader looks at the written symbols, punctuation marks, and spaces to use his mental approach for gaining meaning. Francis Bacon (17th century) says that reading makes a full man. We can get most of our knowledge through reading skill. Most of the students cannot read well because they are weak in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, spelling and reading speed. It is said about reading skill that it is a boring task. Majority of the students who can read a text, do not want to read because they feel it as a burden or tiresome task. In Florida about 80% of the students can read a text but they do not want to read (Poppe, 2005).

To make students read a text is the basic part of elementary education. Reading is a skill which is the most important. Even in the most advanced countries such as North America, Australia and Britain researchers are still working for the development of reading skill. They are in the belief that phonology and vocabulary can help in the development of reading skill. With the help of vocabulary fluency can be increased in reading skill (Konza, 2011). Majority of the students cannot read well because they are weak in vocabulary. According to researchers a strong vocabulary has a positive effects on the reading skill of students (Moses & Duke, 2003). With the help of strong vocabulary, reading skill can be improved. And strong vocabulary can be gained through L2 (second language) proficiency, pictorial input and dictionary use (You, 2011). Increase in reading power depends upon vocabulary. A strong vocabulary can help in the development of good pronunciation (Aarnoutse, Van Leeuwe, Voeten, & Oud, 2001). Young children naturally try to learn words for their communication. They are not only learning about words' reading but are trying to use them effectively. They are trying that how to decode words. At this stage they are trying to learn all the four language skills. They are trying to add new words to their vocabulary. It is impossible to teach them all words at once or directly (Pikulski & Templeton, 2004).

It is clearly indicated with the help of research that young children improve their reading skill with the help of spellings. To know about the spelling can contribute to sounds and vocabulary growth. It can help in the skill of comprehension (Moats, 2005). Without correct spelling students cannot improve their reading competency. Most of the elementary level students are struggling for the improvement of spelling. If once they recognize about spelling and improve about these skills, then it is quite easy for them to increase their reading fluency. If once they improve their reading then they will not be stumbling over strange words (Johnson, 2013). Knowledge about the sound and spelling is the most important in reading skill. With the help of spelling and sound later on the students can improve their reading skill. Spelling and reading are considered as the same sides of a coin (Rekha, 2014).

Different scholars have thrown light on the difficulty of reading skill. Whatever points they have given, some of them are common. They have said that reading is not natural. It means that reading is not God gifted, so it is to be learned. To learn about reading one should know about the sound of words or alphabets (Bender & Larkin, 2009). Whenever we read an article silently we use pronunciation. Because we use our lips, vocal cords and tongue when we read a text. And whatever we read silently we can hear our words (Walton & Griffin, 2006). Most of the students are weak in reading because they remained weak in their primary education in the field of phonology. In the last twenty years it remained the most important cause for the reading difficulties of students. This ability is related to the word reading skill (Torgesen, 1998).

As reading is defined as a process to understand information or lesson in a text. To know about this very process grammar is the most important thing. With the help of grammar one can understand about syntactic structure. It can help to understand the message in a text (Lopez, 2008). Different studies are set up for understanding the role of grammar in reading skill. The function of grammar in reading skill cannot be negated. With the help of grammar one can understand about the real sense of a text. With the help of grammar one can have a strong command over the reading skill (Gascoigne, 2005).

Fluency or speed reading is the ability with the help of which one can read a text smoothly and accurately. It is found that reading fluency is mostly ignored in class room. Having the repetition of a text to read it again and again or to increase the habit of reading can improve fluency (Baker, 2008). Some of the students have difficulties in their reading because they are not fluent. Those students who are weak in cognitive, working memory problems, and problems in explanation are likely to be weak in reading fluency. There are hundreds strategies for the students' speed reading skill (Harvey, 2014).

Objectives of the Study

1. To diagnose reading difficulties of the students at Elementary Level.
2. To find out the role of vocabulary in reading skill of the students at Elementary Level
3. To identify the importance of grammar in reading skill of the students at Elementary Level
4. To find out the role of spelling and pronunciation in reading skill of the students at Elementary Level

Research Methodology

The current research is Descriptive in nature. The purpose of the study was to determine students' reading difficulties at elementary level. Data was collected from students about reading difficulties at elementary level with a self-made test and check list.

Population

There are 98 Government Elementary Schools for Boys with 4,214 students studying in grade 8th in Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (EMIS, 2014). All these 98 schools and students of class 8th in Government Elementary Schools for Boys in District Mardan were constituted as the population of the study.

Sample

25 Government Elementary Schools for Boys (25%) and 1054 students (25%) of elementary schools in District Mardan were selected randomly as the sample of the study.

Population of the study

1. All Government Elementary Schools for Boys in District Mardan.
2. Total students in class 8th in Govt Elementary Schools for Boys in District Mardan.

Total Number of Govt Elementary Schools for Boys in District Mardan = 98

Total Number of Male Students in class 8th in District Mardan = 4214

1. Sample of Schools = 25 schools
2. Sample of Students = 1054

Research Tools

Data was collected with the help of self-made test and checklist. With the help of test data was collected about vocabulary, spelling and grammar. Checklist was used for the data about pronunciation and reading speed or fluency.

Pilot Study

A self-made test and checklist was made for the collection of data from the students. But before the collection of data it was passed through test-retest process. This process was applied on 50 students in two elementary schools near Takht Bhai. The result that was achieved was so. In the test retest process, the cumulative percent of weak and poor in vocabulary was 62.20%. About grammar was 65%. About speed reading the cumulative percent was 58%.

Results and Discussion

The determination of the research was to solve the problems of the students' reading dilemma at elementary level in District Mardan. Data was collected with the help of self-made test and checklist. First of all, data for test was taken from government school 8th class English text book. With the help of test data was collected from 8th class students about vocabulary, grammar and spelling. After test from the very students' data was collected with the help of checklist about pronunciation and reading speed or fluency. For the arrangement of test and checklist data SPSS was used to know about the Frequency, Percent, Valid Percent and Cumulative Percent. The collected data was categorized in five categories, P for poor or those who did not attempt the test very well. W, for weak, who attempted the test but did not pass. A for average or those who passed the test or were according to their level. EX for excellent or those who had a little bit command. OS for outstanding or those who had full command. Rubric for the data is the following:

No	Title	Percent
1	POOR	1 TO 20
2	WEAK	21 TO 40
3	AVERAGE	41 TO 60
4	EXCELLENT	61 TO 80
5	OUTSTANDING	81 TO 100

Table 1
The Role of Vocabulary in Reading skill of the Students

Vocabulary				
Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
P	81	7.7	7.7	7.8
W	276	26.2	26.2	34.0
A	294	27.9	27.9	61.9
EX	278	26.4	26.4	88.2
OS	124	11.8	11.8	100.0
Total	1054	100.0	100.0	

In the table no 1 the full detail about the role of vocabulary in reading skill is given where among 1054 students the frequency of poor or those who did not attempt the test is 81. This is 7.7 percent and valid percent of the full sample. The frequency of W or weak or those who attempted the test but did not pass is 276. It is 26.2 percent or the valid percent of the full sample. The frequency of average students is shown with the help of A. They are 294 among 1054 and its percent or valid percent is 27.9.

On the other hand, the frequency of EX or excellent students in table no 1 is 278. It's percent and valid percent is 26.4. The frequency of OS or outstanding students in the table is 124 and its percent or valid percent is 11.8. It is shown in the table that most of the students are weak in vocabulary due to which they cannot read at their level. The detail about the question would help the authority or teachers to focus on students' vocabulary so that they may improve their reading skill.

Table 2
The Role of Spelling in Reading Difficulties of the Students

Spelling				
Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
P	213	20.2	20.2	20.2
W	434	41.2	41.2	61.4
A	245	23.2	23.2	84.6
EX	114	10.8	10.8	95.4
OS	48	4.6	4.6	100.0
Total	1054	100.0	100.0	

It is said that spelling plays a major role in the reading skill of the students. Majority of the students cannot read well because they are weak in spelling. The statistical detail about this is given in the table no 2, where the frequency of P or poor is 213 among the sample 1054 students. It is 20.2 percent or valid percent of the whole sample. Frequency of the W or weak students in the table is 434 and it is 41.2 percent or valid percent of 1054 students.

On the other hand, the frequency of A or average students in the table is 245. It's percent or valid percent is 23.2. EX or excellent students in the table are 114. It's percent and valid percent is 10.8. The frequency of OS or outstanding students in the table is 48. Percent or valid percent in the table is 4.6.

It is found that majority of the students who cannot read well are weak in spelling. The detail in the table would help teachers and authority to focus on students' spelling skill.

Table 3
The Role of Pronunciation in Reading Difficulties of the Students

Pronunciation				
Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
P	200	19.0	19.0	19.0
W	442	41.9	41.9	60.9
A	243	23.1	23.1	84.0
EX	116	11.0	11.0	95.0
OS	52	4.9	4.9	100.0
Total	1054	100.0	100.0	

In table no 3 the statistical detail about the question of pronunciation is given that pronunciation affects students' reading skill. Elementary school 1054 class 8th students were tested. In the table the frequency of P or poor is 200. It's percent and valid percent is 19.0. The frequency of W or weak students who attempted the test is 442 in the table. It's percent and valid percent in the table is 41.9. The cumulative percent of the P and W is 60.9. On the contrary side the frequency of A or average is 243 in the table. The percent and valid percent of the A is 23.1. The frequency of EX or excellent is 116 and its percent and valid percent is 11.9. Along with this the frequency of OS or outstanding students is 52. It's percent and valid percent is 4.9.

In the light of the detail given in the table, majority of the students are weak in pronunciation due to which they cannot read well. The given detail in table no 3 would help the authority and teachers to know about the lope holes due to which students' reading skill is affected

Table 4
The Role of Grammar in Reading Difficulties of the Students

Grammar				
Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
P	583	55.3	55.3	55.3
W	135	12.8	12.8	68.1
A	170	16.1	16.1	84.3
EX	110	10.4	10.4	94.7
OS	56	5.3	5.3	100.0
Total	1054	100.0	100.0	

In the test about reading skill a question was mentioned that whether grammar affects students reading skill? Detail about this question is given in table no 4. According to the statistical data in the table the frequency of P or poor is 583. It is a major portion among the sample of the study. Percent and valid percent about P in the table is 55.3. It becomes more than half. The frequency of W or weak is 135 and it is 12.8 percent or valid percent. The cumulative percent about P and W is 68.1.

On the other hand, the frequency of EX or excellent in the table is 110. The percent and valid percent about this is 10.4. It shows that only a little portion of the sample could read a text. The frequency of OS or outstanding in the table is 56. The percent and valid percent about this in the table is 5.3.

In the light of the above detail it is found that majority of the students are weak in grammar. Due to their grammar weakness they cannot read well. It would help the help the syllabus/ curriculum designers and teachers to focus on grammar for a better reading skill.

Table 5
The Role of Speed Reading Skill in Reading Difficulties of the Students

Speed Reading				
Valid	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
P	201	19.1	19.1	19.1
W	439	41.7	41.7	60.7
A	244	23.1	23.1	83.9
EX	118	11.2	11.2	95.1
OS	52	4.9	4.9	100.0
Total	1054	100.0	100.0	

With the help of checklist data was collected about students' reading speed. The detail about this question is given in the table no 5 where the frequency of P or poor is 201. It is 19.1 percent or valid percent of the whole sample. The frequency of W or weak in the table is 439 and its percent and valid percent is 41.7. The cumulative percent about P and Win the table is 60.7. In the light of cumulative percent, it is shown that 60.7% of the sample is in the category of poor and weak.

On the contrary side the frequency of A or average is 244. The percent and valid percent about this is 23.1. The frequency of EX or excellent in the table is 118. The percent and valid percent about this is 11.2. While the frequency of OS or outstanding in the table is 52 and it is 4.9 percent or valid percent of the sample.

In the light of the statistical detail it is shown that majority of the students are slow readers. They cannot read a text in its proper time. The detail about this would pave the way towards speed in reading skill. As there is no scale in our schools to judge or measure students reading speed so it would help the authority to focus on this.

Conclusions

In the light of findings following conclusions were made.

1. Majority of the students were weak in reading because they were not properly equipped with vocabulary. Their vocabulary level was very weak. It may be due to the reason that teachers were not focusing on vocabulary.
2. Students could not read well according to their level because they did not know about grammar. The major reason was that grammar is difficult and boring which is difficult for students to learn or understand.

3. Majority of the students could not read well because they could not spell most of the words correctly. Due to the unusual spelling of certain words reading was difficult for them. They were weak in spelling because they were feeling their books as a burden.
4. Reading was difficult for most of the students because they could not pronounce a word correctly. They had no practice to read loudly or had the practice of silent reading due to which they could not read properly.
5. Students could not read properly because they were slow readers. They could not read at the appropriate rate. They were slow because they did not read aloud and were not passed through time test through which one can improve himself.

Recommendations

In the light of findings and conclusions the researcher came to the following recommendations.

1. The more competent a student in vocabulary the more he will have a command on reading skill. It was found that majority of the students were weak in reading skill because they were not knowing about vocabulary as well. It is recommended that there should be a specific limit of vocabulary for all categories of students. Yet those who are too much weak and cannot improve, they should be given some specific words as vocabulary on daily basis to learn.
2. The more students know about pronunciation and spelling the more they will be competent in reading. As it was exposed that a large number of the students could not read well because they were not knowing well about spelling and pronunciation. It is recommended that teachers should practice students about pronunciation and spelling. Specific workshops should be arranged for teachers in which there should be a focus on the science of sound.
3. Majority of the students could not read text due to their weakness in grammar. It is recommended that there should be a portion about grammar in a text book. Teachers should also stress on grammar because they mostly ignore grammar while teaching a text. If they focus on grammar, then students can easily understand.

4. It was found that majority of the students could not read well because they were slow readers. They could not read at the appropriate rate. To solve this very problem, it is recommended that the teachers should ask students to read aloud in the presence of others, so that they may improve their reading speed. They should read a text again and again for the improvement of speed.

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