Assessment of reading performance of non-Native English learners

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ABSTRACT

English being an international language is the need of the time. Reading is one of the essential skills of language learning for non-native English learners. In recent years the concern of reading decline among students has become a point of discussion among educators. In this article, we probe how the quality of English reading is going down gradually among non-native English learning students. For this purpose, we measure the reading abilities of grade 5 students with multiple languages as their mother tongue, having probably not very different socio-economic backgrounds. The data of students (N=589) were collected through convenience sampling. Students were assessed in three domains of reading (fluency, comprehension, and reading vocabulary) through the self-developed English Reading Achievement Scale (ERAS). The results demonstrated unsatisfactory performance of sampled students' reading in English. Only 56 percent of students remained successful in the assessment of English reading. The performance of girls' school students in reading was comparatively better than the boys' students. Students' performance was probably better in reading fluency and worse in reading vocabulary.

INTRODUCTION

Educational Background

Learning is a key factor in the development of a nation. The primary components of learning are reading and writing (Hafeez et al., 2020). Reading is the basic element of fourfold language skills. It is a solid foundation for learning any language (Ekmekçi, 2016). Various Studies reflected that mastering reading in the early years of schooling positively affects the academic performance of the students in later grades (Dev & Qiqieh, 2016; Bodorík, 2017; Budiana & Djuwari, 2018; Qiu & Fang, 2019; Walsh & Rísquez, 2020). According to Wexler, (2018), the first years of schooling of children must be devoted to developing basic skills of reading. Polishing reading proficiency in pupils needs due attention from the teachers' side. Teachers can engage them in reading various types of reading material. The components of reading like reading phonics, phonemic awareness, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary should be learned by children in early grades (Cimmiyotti, 2013). Research showed that better opportunities for reading in early grades enable children to cope with reading problems in higher grades. This practice would develop reading habits in students. Moreover, good readers can also gain more information and express their ideas in various pieces of writing (Heibert, 2009; Nicolescu, 2015; Iqbal et al., 2021).

In a recent perspective, reading has become very important to live in a society (Gilakjani & Sabouri, 2016). It is also considered a very common and important element in the pedagogical context. Improved reading skills affect students' academic achievement and increase their interest in education. The problem arises when children are deprived of the opportunities of reading in the early period of life. In later grades, it often negatively affects their academic performance (Bodorík, 2017).

The invention of information communicational technology brought revolutionary changes in various fields of life, including the world of learning (Zhang & Zhang, 2020). The shift from text to the computer screen, touch pads, and mobile devices affected the learning processes both positively and negatively (Karakas et al., 2016). In this transitional scenario, we thought it might affect the reading ability of young children. Therefore, we tried to probe the current situation of the reading ability of non-native English learning adolescents.

Purpose of the Study

Reading proficiency is very important for students' best performance in their academic field. Considering reading significance for students' achievements, the present article reports on the situation of reading standards in English

as a second language. This research aimed to probe the condition of English reading performance of the students of local languages. Students were assessed in reading through a self-developed reading achievement scale. The selected students belonged to schools in the Southern districts of Punjab, Pakistan.

Research Questions
The researchers attempted to answer the following questions of the study.

1. What is the level of current English reading performance of fifth-grade students included in the sample?
2. Is there any difference between the English reading performance of fifth-grade boys' and girls' students included in the sample?

LITERATURE REVIEW
The decline in reading quality among young readers in recent years has become a global issue (Smith & Day, 2013). Although the problem is worse in the case of 2nd language (L2) readers, particularly in developing or underdeveloped countries yet, developed countries like the United States are not an exemption (Vajjala, 2018). Research in reading shows that trend of reading among young readers is declining day by day. In the USA, from 1982 to 2004, for a period of 22 years, almost 10 percent of reading interest among readers became slow down, and 20 million readers left their reading habits (Smith & Day, 2013). Such decreasing proof of reading in the United States of America (USA) was also indicated by the Reading at Risk Report published by the National Endowment for the Arts (Mohammed, 2018). The report shows that several children were found unable to read during the study survey report of 'Reading at Risk'. Sifakis, (2019) have indicated such evidence by saying that when young students come to study in middle schools, they have no concept of reading due to weak literacy background; therefore, they often fail to access knowledge and information that is achieved through reading. It is because the goal of reading is to construct meaning from the text through visually encoded information (Sung, 2016).

Learners with reading deficiency remain behind the regular stream and cannot meet high standards of education (Aliyev & Ismayilova, 2017). This inability of literacy among students creates problems for both teachers and students, as students lose their self-concept to be good readers (Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007), and teachers also face problems in teaching them, especially in reading activities. Moreover, oral reading inefficiency creates trouble for learning the other components of reading, e.g. comprehension, understanding, and reading vocabulary and reading material (Meisinger et al., 2010). This problem is common among school-level readers (Tamimi Sa'd, 2018). According to Short (2017), children's reading failure affects all areas of their educational performance. Rezaei et al., (2019) illustrated the importance of reading concerning different research and concluded that reading greatly impacts children's academic achievement. Certain factors are mainly responsible for poor literacy among students. As students of low-income families face financial problems and have no spare time and resources to read books at home (Gupta, 2019). Such students, if not given extra time and reading material at school, cannot be compared with the students of those families that have enough time and reading resources at home (Sparks, 2016). So, poverty is also a problem for those who hinder learners reading abilities. Generally, students learn to read by giving them free books. This tendency to give free or reduced-cost books to home children (migrated children) was perhaps started in the late 19th century (Khonbi & Sadeghi, 2017).

Säälik (2015) considered reading a vital life skill. Acquisition of early reading dexterity is an integral part of children's education and second language learning. It is an effective source of drawing out meaning from the printed material and a way of foreign and 2nd language learning (Uchidiuno et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2017; Beltrán-Planques & Querol-Julián, 2018; Schneider, 2019).

Griffiths et al. (2016) stated that reading dramatically affects students' educational performance. The reading trends have changed in the last two decades with the intervention of digital media and advanced technology that affected reading patterns (Markova, 2017). This shift from print to digital display has opened new dimensions of reading. So, it was essential to study the current situation of reading in the region where English is taught as a second or third language and not spoken in rural areas. There are no English teaching academies in the area of southern Punjab where the research was conducted. English is an international-level language that also has a significant role in the progress of people like Pakistan. Pakistan is a developing country where English is a compulsory subject taught up to graduation level. It is an official language of the county, and all competitive examinations and admission are conducted in the English language. Such division of unequal educational access creates problems like poor and rich discrepancy (Kirchner & Moster, 2017; Tamimi-Sa'd, 2018) that further harm quality and equity in education. Much more focus is on the scores of academic achievements that are also under criticism.

Every year, a large number of student drops from schools up to the elementary level. One of the main factors may be a lack of English reading proficiency. Such a marginalized area requires more support to increase literacy rather than the negligence of reading. Studies show that students have no considerable interest in reading (Bello et al., 2015). This alarming situation will be a serious challenge for govt. It is because literacy deficiency creates a margin between

the poor and rich that is a hindrance to making a stable society. The previous studies mostly focused on 3rd-grade children reading abilities (Qian & Jingxia, 2016; Alghofaili & Elyas, 2017; Elyas & Alghofaili, 2019). But no study was found about students reading performance at the 5th grade level of education. Hence, it was anticipated this study would give more accurate results on students reading performance in English than the previous studies.

METHODOLOGY

The present study was based on the survey method. Here we tried to assess the level of current reading performance of 5th-grade students. The data were collected through convenience sampling from (N=589) grade five Pakistani students from the schools of six districts (Dera Ghazi Khan, Layyah, Rajanpur, Bahawalpur, Multan, Bahawalpur, and Muzaffar Garh) of southern Punjab. We collected students' responses through a self-developed reading achievement scale. The research tool was designed to measure three important components of reading; fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary (Chang, 2016; Al-Zayed, 2017; Domagała-Zyśk & Podlewska, 2019; Voeun et al., 2020). It was typically made to assess reading from the same grade level text to find the exact performance of students' reading. Generally, reading revolves around the five basic components; phonics, phonemic awareness, reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary (Thorpe et al., 2017; Fauzi & Hashim, 2020). However, the latter three components; fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary, have a great effect on a student's overall academic performance. As a result, it was decided to measure the later three components of reading (fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary) through the English reading achievement scale. Hence a reading scale of 100 marks was prepared to measure three basic components of reading; fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary of grade five students reading competence in English. The scale was developed from a 5th grade textbook of English published by Punjab Text Book Board Lahore, following the aims and objectives of the National Curriculum. Oral Reading fluency was measured by oral reading cards prepared from an English textbook of grade five. However, comprehension and vocabulary were assessed through tests following the bloom taxonomy of educational objectives. It was because bloom's taxonomy was used for classroom tests as well as external examinations at the Primary level in the Punjab School Education Department (Kanai, 2011). The English textbook comprised 11 lessons. Two paragraphs containing equal words (180 each) were chosen, one from the first half of the book and the other from the second half (from the last lesson) of the book, to measure English reading fluency to balance the difficulty level. Multiple-choice items were made from the given paragraphs containing ten marks to measure the learners' reading comprehension. For reading vocabulary, ten words were selected from the given paragraphs. The selected words were also given ten marks. The students were required to match the word meanings in columns for reading vocabulary. Finally, the English reading performance scale of 100 marks for grade five students was prepared to assess three basic elements of reading; oral reading fluency, comprehension, and reading fluency.

For content and face validity, the scale of reading was shown and discussed with 20 Educators/English teachers of primary schools. Then pilot testing of the reading scale was conducted on 40 students in grade five for validation. During the piloting of the test, the time of administration of the test and reading benchmarks were fixed. The data were collected as a summative assessment of basic reading elements. It was better to follow the cross-sectional method for data collection during the academic session of 2016-17, as Cimmiyotti (2013) suggested for such survey-type studies.

The researchers personally visited the schools to collect data. Assessment of reading was conducted in two rounds. In the first-round students' oral reading fluency test was taken. Students were called individually to read the oral reading card. Each student was asked to read the reading paragraphs and words (180 words) in the given time (120 seconds). The stopwatch and audio device were kept on a calculating time and recorded students' voices for further confirmation of correct words. When the first student completed reading oral reading paragraphs, then the next student was asked to read the same paragraphs of the reading test. The students were asked to read the reading card. Mistakes of students were marked on another copy of the reading. This was done for both paragraphs of the text. This process was continued until the last student completed the reading turn. After completing the oral reading by all the students who participated in the reading test of English in the first round in the second round, the same students were asked to sit in rows to complete multiple choice questions of comprehension (Bowers, 1993) and match the vocabulary columns.

RESULTS

After collecting students' data through a reading achievement scale then, students' papers were marked. Keywords from these paragraphs were identified for oral assessment of the students. Each keyword was given 22 marks. Each paragraph was given 40 marks. Each Multiple-choice question and matching item was also given one mark. The result of students' reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary was prepared separately. Then the cumulative marks of boys' and girls' schools were counted. Simple descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. The

following results were reported from the collected data. Students' marks were calculated, and the mean score against the scale was 56 (M=56, Table 1). This shows a discouraging performance of students in English reading.

Table 1: Mean scores of students in different components of reading of English

Sr. #	Reading components	N	Mean	SD
1	Fluency	589	61.56	22.14
2	Comprehension	589	54.4	19.51
3	Vocabulary	589	24.8	12.74
4	Overall reading performance	589	56	20.15

The student's scores on three components of reading are; fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. They perform best in reading fluency among the rest two components (Fluency M=61.56, Table 1). The sampled students demonstrated fewer mean scores on comprehension (M=54.4) and vocabulary (M=24.8than reading fluency (M=61.56). The student's performance on the English reading test shows that their overall performance in reading was not good. The component-wise performance of students was also not excellent. It is because they only got better scores in reading fluency to some extent. Their performance in the other two components was also weaker.

Table 2: Comparison of students' performance in different components of reading

No.	Nature of test	Gender	N	Mean	MD	*t*	*p*
1	English reading Scale	boys	296	51.00	11.36	5.26	0.000
		girls	293	62.35			
2	Fluency	boys	296	45.45	7.65	3.81	0.000
		girls	293	53.10			
3	Comprehension	boys	296	41.8	17.3	8.88	0.000
		girls	293	59.1			
4	Vocabulary	boys	296	13.6	19.8	9.39	0.001
		girls	293	33.4			

Note: N= number of students, M= Mean, t= t value, MD= Mean Difference p= significance level (p<0.05)

The results in above Table 2 show that 296 students' mean score was 51. Comparing the mean score of boys' and girls' students, we note that girls' students' mean score was greater (G; M=62.35>B; M=51) than boys. The inferential statistics also show significant results. When comparing boys' and girls' students reading performance, their *t*-value was 5.26, and *the p-value* was 0.000. The given p-value was highly significant. It shows that there was a significant difference between the reading achievement of boys' and girls' students. Hence, in the sample (N=589), girl students performed better than the boy school students in the reading test of English.

Table 2 shows the comparison of students against different components of reading. We see that girls' students again competed better than their boy fellows on all three reading components. The mean score against reading fluency of girl students was 53.10. That is greater than the mean score of boys (G; M=53.10>B; M= 45.45). The p-value of 00 was also highly significant. Similarly, in reading comprehension (G; M=59.1>B; M=41.8) and reading vocabulary (G; M=33.4>B; M=13.), the mean scores of girls were higher than their boy fellows. The probability values of 0.000 for comprehension and 0.001 for vocabulary shown in table 2 were also significant. Hence it is concluded boy students performed better on the reading achievement scale. Their performance was comparatively better in all three components of English reading.

DISCUSSION

The paper reflects the reading achievement of 5th-grade students in English. The collective results of students reading tests show that students face reading issues in English. It is because two hundred and sixty (260) students out of (589) got either 44% or fewer marks in the English reading test. This shows a severe concern for the reading achievement of the students in English. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reports that a score below 40% in reading assessment was considered not a good reading score (Snyder & Dillow, 2012). Hence according to the present study, the performance of 5th-grade students in reading was not good. The results of the study almost correlate with the research conducted in connection with the quality of education in Punjab in 2011. Previous researches show that 67.4 percent of 5th-grade students could read just simple sentences of English (Niwaz et al., 2014). Such studies on reading just indicated the reading of sentences in English. We tried to assess students' overall English reading performance. The same problem was also evidenced by the report of the Annual Status of Education (Banerji et al., 2013). Government reports try to claim to provide standard education to the students. Hence, the present pursuit made it clear that still, a large number of students in 5th grade were unable to read the English textbook of 5th grade with accuracy and fluency.

The reading achievement scores further demonstrate that girls' school students cumulatively performed better than the boys' students in overall reading performance. Students performed better in English reading fluency than in reading comprehension and vocabulary. Students' reading vocabulary skills have been found very weak in the reading test. Their reading comprehension skill was also not satisfactory. The comparison of boy and girl students' achievement reflects that girl students' performance cumulatively looked better than the boy students in their overall

reading. Hence, gender differences were found in students reading achievement in English. Mutangi (2016), in his research on primary school children reading achievement, also discovered the same gender difference effects. Girls' students outperform boys in their research findings. Contrary to this in research on the reading performance of 2nd-grade students, gender differences do not matter (Vlachos & Papadimitriou, 2015). But in research completed by Logan & Johnston (2010), gender differences were found among boys' and girls' students reading achievement. So, to remove the contradictions of previous studies, the results of our study assimilate with the findings of popular earlier research. Moreover, learning outcomes of reading in both genders (boys and girls) were not good but rather in declining condition. So, there is an imperative need to develop strategies for English reading teaching to augment learners' capability in reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary.

CONCLUSIONS

The study is concluded based on the objectives and research questions. We focused on two aspects of students' reading performance. The one was to probe the current situation of students reading proficiency in English, and the other was the difference in the performance of boys' and girls' students in their reading. It was found that the performance of sampled students (N=589) in English reading was not good. Only 56% of students out of the sampled (N=589) students had been able to obtain satisfactory marks on the reading achievement scale for grade five. Almost 44% of the students either got below-average marks on reading performance tests or remained unsuccessful. During data collection, it was also noted that several students in the 5th grade of boys and girls schools were even unable to read the English textbook of grade 2 of the Punjab Textbook Board. However, among the sampled students, only 56% of students reading performance was comparatively better than others. Their reading proficiency was better in reading fluency and found most deteriorated in reading vocabulary and comprehension. Girl school students' performance was better than their boy fellow students in all three reading components (reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary). We tried to find the probability value of the *t-test* of these three reading components between girls and boys and also found a significant difference in all three components. Hence girls' school students' performance in English reading tests was better overall as well as in reading component-wise than their boy fellow of grade five. In the above conclusion, we realized that students' decline in English reading is a great concern for educators, school administration, and curriculum experts. Hence there is a great need to address this issue of students' learning. All the stakeholders must take measures to address this issue. Furthermore, research may open possibilities of adopting relevant measures that foster students reading abilities in English. Hence, to improve students' reading abilities, we recommend further research to develop teaching strategies that enhance their reading proficiency in English.

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