

Evaluation of Teaching Reading Strategies Used by Early Grade Teachers

Sher Zaman *
Sumera Asghar**

Abstract

Importance of reading skills is admissible especially for early graders' future learning. However, there is interdependency between students' reading skills and their teachers' 'teaching reading strategies'. Hence the focus of the current study was to evaluate 'teaching reading', i.e. phonemic awareness, word recognition, reading fluency and text comprehension, to early grades by reading teachers. For this purpose, quantitative research with survey method based on field observation was conducted. Self-developed tool i.e. structured observation schedule was used for data collection. The data was collected through performance checklist, hence a manageable sample, through convenient sampling in the sense of willingness to be observed, was selected of primary school English teachers (n = 10). Three consecutive observations were conducted of each participant of the study. Descriptive statistics, i.e., frequencies, percentage and mean were used to analyze the collected data. The results of the study show that generally the teachers focus on oral expression and meanings of difficult words. While majority of them least use 'teaching reading strategies recommended for developing phonemic awareness, fluency through repeated reading practices among students and the strategies helpful for text comprehension.

Keywords: teaching reading strategies, early graders, phonemic awareness, word recognition, fluency and text comprehension.

* Department of Education, University of Gujrat, Gujrat, Pakistan (Corresponding author)
Email: smzaman@uog.edu.pk

** MPhil scholar (University of Gujrat), School Education Department Punjab, Pakistan

Introduction

Language teaching in Pakistan particularly English as second language is under criticism by the various educationists and language experts. The same is reported in a study that elementary school teachers perform sub-standard teaching to achieve learning outcomes particularly English language teaching is considered to be far from acceptable standards in the country (Warsi, 2004). Likewise, the results of the Annual Status of Education Reports support the concerns because according to three consecutive reports, only 27%, 26% and 25% of grade 3 students can read English sentence fluently (ASER, 2012 and 2013). Similarly, 43% of class 5 children were not able to read English sentences of grade 2 as compared to 38% in 2013 (ASER, 2014). Similarly, an assessment report published by the Punjab Government in roadmap reported that only 23% students of grade 3 comprehend an English passage of four lines.

In the given scenario the increased significance is there of the recommended teaching reading strategies by the panel of experts specifically for language teaching and developing literacy skills among the early graders in 'Put Reading First'. In this regard the panel identified from different research studies the certain teaching strategies which scientifically proved to be helpful in developing students' reading skills effectively (Armbruster; Lehr; Osborn; and Adler, 2001). Hence the question arises as whether the language teachers in local school settings use those strategies in their early grade language classroom?

Then what is to be done? Teaching is what drives learning because there is interdependency between students' literacy skills and 'teaching reading strategies' applied to them. There are effective teachers in Pakistan who teach purposefully; transferring their practices to what is needed. Thus, preparing teachers to teach reading more meaningfully in classroom, like planned lessons, would work as 'detailed scripted lessons' have been helpful in Punjab to bring significant improvement in literacy and numeracy skills of the 3 graders (ASER, 2019).

When a learner enters a school, it is the role and duty of early grade teachers to provide, plan and teach through effective reading (phonemic awareness, word-recognition, fluency and comprehension) programs that enables learners to become skillful and successful readers. Whole class shared reading, word and sentences level reading, teacher guided-reading, independent reading, loud reading and silent reading are standard teaching reading strategies for early graders. Teachers basically act as model readers, to facilitate learners to apply reading strategies. They have to use effective practices for engaging learners in large and small groups, and individualized instruction. They need to use reflective

practices, observation and diversity of evaluation strategies to discover each learner's needs to give individual instruction (Armbruster, et. al., 2001; Chintha, 2008).

As reported with reference of above researches, results of students' reading abilities in Pakistani public elementary schools are not optimistic. There may be different reasons, i.e., the socio-economic factors of the family, association of children with their family, student's reading habits outside the schools, early graders' reading at schools and availability of proper instructional material, etc., (Geske & Ozola, 2008). It seems probably that lower teaching standards of English teachers results among students' poor attainment of learning outcomes particularly their reading skills. So, the researcher has planned a study to explore and evaluate the ground realities in terms of current teaching practices of working teachers for teaching reading to early grade students in public schools.

Literature Review

Language learning is organized in two phases, i.e., first is the foundation phase which prolongs from KG to grade 3 and provides base for further reading skills, while the second is the intermediate phase from grade 4 to 6. In the later phase, it is concentrated to develop the primary literacy skills in children along with thinking skills among them. Phase 2 having dependency on previous one, cannot succeed unless foundation phase of the literacy learning program has been covered correctly (Chintha et al., 2008). Therefore, the current study is focused on the early graders teaching reading strategies by the school teachers. Language is basically oral but for effective and comprehensive communication students need to learn reading and writing skills along with listening and speaking because in language learning listening and reading are active and receptive forms of communication (Alcantara, 2003).

Among the four language skills, reading is the first step towards the acquired two language skills, i.e., reading and writing. Reading being source of getting information, ideas is very important in education process because competence in reading can open the door to worldwide store of knowledge and information, hence reading is the base of all learning skills. Developing good reading skills can develop students' ability to understand concepts and ideas, improves spelling, develops critical thinking, increases the vocabulary, develops positive values in students, increases ability to ponder and improves student's writing skills (Wolf, 2007). Reading provides base for various learning behaviors like the reason of reading is comprehension which results in learning, i.e., the desired

changes in reader's behaviour to survive, to learn, and to read for pleasure (Wallace, 2003).

Those children who do not successfully read during earlier grades are unable in next grades to prove themselves efficient learners. Emergent readers cannot even develop their writing skills and remain backward in terms of self-guided learners in other school subjects. The basic reading skills necessary to become literate do not develop as expected until to learn to recognize language symbols and to be able to recognize written letters and words. Reading is a visual process that begins with one's ability to use one's cognition to interpret the written shapes (Macceca, 2007). It requires mastery of alphabetic principles, word- recognition, vocabulary knowledge and a range of strategies to be engaged with text meanings. Learning to read or to develop reading skills, is in sequence and developmental that involves a program for acquiring and developing reading concepts and skills. According to Chintha et al, (2008), through the following summarized process, a skillful reader passes while reading skillfully.

Before reading as a skillful reader, the child needs to read the label, view content list, word index, scan sub-headings and sections and look deeply the illustrations for deeper understanding. The competent readers use the given information to foresee and get in advance what the text means. During reading a competent reader reads different words including the sight words automatically without focusing on syllables, monitors meanings of the text, gets the main idea and meaning of complex words, sentence or paragraph. A skillful reader links contents of the text to previous knowledge and experiences, then thus learns the contents more meaningfully.

Further Chintha, et al., (2008) described four reading components including i) phonemic awareness ii) Phonics/vocabulary, iii) fluency, and iv) text comprehension. Detailed description of the above components is given in the following paragraphs.

Phonemic awareness is a skill helpful to be aware of, reflect on, and to manipulate sounds in spoken words. Here children learn to listen, to read print, to be aware of how the sounds in words work. Then comes word recognition in which the read initiates to recognize the language symbols and associate them with different sounds to pronounce particular words during the print of the text books etc. Further step is of fluency in reading a text is to read correctly and rapidly. In this, readers recognize word sounds automatically. Fluent readers read smoothly with expressions. Fluency in reading is critical for ensuring link in word

recognition and comprehension. At this stage of reading, fluent readers connect ideas in text and with their background knowledge.

Fluency instruction focuses on appropriate speed, correctness, proper phrasing and reading aloud as well as silent to enhance one's skills for text comprehension (Kuhn & Rasinski, 2007). The end reason of reading is comprehension; however, reading is not just identifying the written symbols or alphabets but acquiring knowledge through the process that involves sight and mental faculty leading to comprehension which is the motive for reading. Further research supports the given generalization that purposeful readers better comprehend than less purposeful and less goal directed readers (Catherine, 2002).

After having extended review of the reading skills, now review proceeds to the more focus aspect of the research, i.e. teaching reading strategies.

Successful reading includes phonemic awareness where reading teachers teach children to notice, think about, and work with sounds of the spoken and text language. Teachers use various activities for phonemic awareness, including phonemes isolation, phoneme deletion and segmentation etc., (Armbruster; Lehr; Osborn; and Adler, 2001). Further Armbruster, et. al. (2001) prescribed for fluency, shared reading, which is helpful to build up self-confidence among learners and permit them to be independent reader rapidly (Chintha, et. al., 2008). Similarly, another, fluency developing strategy is reading aloud by the teacher to the whole class or to small group at their understanding level or independent reading by the children themselves. For help to learn more words, modelling a range of reading text for language development of the early graders is also recommended.

Another reading technique is to read in chunks that enhance fluency that supports in meaning and expression as Lai, Tung, & Luo, (2008) reported that such strategies are effective for early graders to learn new or second language more efficiently and creatively. Further as far as vocabulary development is concerned a great deal of vocabulary is learned indirectly, some vocabulary should be taught directly. Direct instruction helps students learn unfamiliar words, that represent complex concepts and are not part of the students' daily life experiences. In indirect learning of vocabulary, first modelling is done through reading aloud to students, no matter what grade they are, thus they can learn words from hearing texts of various kinds read to them (Armbruster, et. al., 2001). For vocabulary development Krashen, (1982), a linguist suggested that more use of high frequency vocabulary, less slang, fewer idioms, shorter sentences, and discussing topics that are familiar to the students, are much effective in increasing early graders vocabulary of all four types. In his

view, providing extra-linguistic support in the form of realia and pictures for beginning classes is not a frill, but a very important part of the tools the teacher has to encourage language acquisition.

Guided reading provides opportunities to integrate learner's growing knowledge of conventions of print, letter sound relationships and other foundational skills in context. The given reading strategy gives the teacher the opportunity to observe reading behaviors, identify areas of need and allow learners to develop more independence and confidence (Chintha, et al., 2008). Further, a learner centered reading strategy is 'independent reading' but it must be a purposeful one, and particularly for early graders interesting books of their own choice, having matching text are required. For independent reading children if facilitated with useful interesting books, then they being highly motivated read far higher level of difficulty, with accuracy (Topping, 2017). Active reading is also very important because an active reader is better than another in proportion as he is capable of a greater range of activity in reading and exerts more effort (Adler & Doren, 1972).

For summarizing meaning or idea of the read text, skimming according to Adler and Doren (1972) or inspectional reading is meant to go through the text quickly to grasp the overall meaning or gist of it. It extracts the main theme or the main idea of the text by a quick reading process, in which reader prepares to answer questions like summarizing, main points of the text, rewrite the text, suitable title to the given passage and extract the central idea of the text etc. Scanning is also helpful for reader to collect particular information, skipping irrelevant, for summarizing the text. Likewise Roomy and Alhawsawi, (2019) summed that students were found to employ various reading strategies for approaching reading materials to identify main ideas, guessing meaning of context and to utilize different ways to deal with reading problems.

Having drawn on the basis of above review, it evolved that opposite to the requirement of National Curriculum (2006) that children should have competencies by the end of grade one is 'to read and understand basic sentences, however as reported by ASER Pakistan 2018 that fewer children being able to read simple sentences (3%) and a story (0%), which shows decline in learning levels for the mean child over the 6-year period, with learning levels being higher for the mean child in 2012 than in 2018 (statistically significant at a 99% confidence level). In the given context it is significant to evaluate as whether language teachers are using those language teaching strategies which are recommended by the panel of experts on reading skills among early graders.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. To what extent teachers use prescribed 'teaching reading strategies' for developing phonemic-awareness among early graders?
2. How much teachers use the suggested 'teaching reading strategies appropriate' for enabling early graders to read words correctly?
3. How many times the teachers use 'teaching reading strategies appropriate for reading text fluently with expression during early grades?
4. What percentage of the specified strategies are used by teachers for developing text comprehension among the early grade students?

Methodology

The current study was quantitative and exploratory for which survey method was used and field observations were done to collect empirical data to address the research questions through which the variable; 'teaching reading strategies', by the early grade teachers was explored.

Population

Target population of the study was all the public primary school teachers in district Gujrat, who are working under 22 administrative clusters of Teachers and Support Centers (CTSC's). Accessible population were the 72 teachers of the 14 public primary schools under the control of a Cluster Teachers Support Center Government Fatima Jinnah Model Girls High School, Gujrat.

Sampling

Researcher used non-random; purposive sampling technique and selected ten (approximately 15%) willing English teachers, in the sense of convenience to collect quality data on the teachers teaching English language to third grade students at different 10 public primary schools. The number of 10 participants was preferred because three observations were made of the each participant to maximize chances of performing the specified 'teaching reading strategies' and to minimize the bias of the observer. The third grade is given emphasis because it is the peak of foundational literacy stage and the base of intermediate literacy stage. English language is selected because it is reported that English is in worse condition as compared to Urdu language in Pakistani public schools. The consent from each subject of the study was taken before data collection through non-participatory observation. Three days consecutive observations were conducted of each one participant of the study to ensure the reliability of the data.

Instrumentation

A non-participant structured observation through performance check list was conducted being more suitable because it has the potential to give valid information as compared to 'what they report, that 'they do' or

think'. Total number of items/listed teaching reading strategies in check list were 20 on four components of the reading skills. A brief description of observation schedule is given in the following table 1.

Table 1

Brief Description of Observation Schedule/ performance check list

Sr. #	Component	Scope	Items	Example
1	Phonemic Awareness	Letters sounds, combining, adding, deleting and segmenting letters to form new words	(1-5) for addressing question 1.	The teacher is teaching sounds of letters to the students.
2	Words pronunciation	Short/long vowels, syllables, silent letters, and digraphs	(6 -10) for question 2.	Students are required to identify and break words into syllables.
3	Teaching Fluency in reading	Chunking, modelling, peer reading and independent reading etc.	(11 -15) related to question 3.	The teacher is presenting model reading for students.
4	Reading Comprehension	Pre, mid and after reading questioning, illustrations, and summarizing text etc.	(16 -20) on research question 4.	The teacher is questioning students before text reading.

Validation of Instrument

Research instrument was being validated by seven subject matter experts (SMEs). The researcher gave them the structured observation schedule. The research objectives, research questions were attached with them. SMEs were requested to check the language, specificity/clarity of the items and the linkage among research objectives, research questions and instrument items. The suggested revisions were to reduce number of items from 38 to 20 because observation is complex activity to complete hence smaller number of behaviours would be efficiently manageable with accuracy. In items 1&2 related to RQ 1, the term, 'phoneme' were suggested to be replaced with 'letters sounds', hence incorporated. Research question 2 related items 7&8 having both 'deletion and addition of letters' was revised according to experts' guidelines and 'practice of deletion and addition of sounds/letters were put in two different items. Research question 3 related item was revised as peer reading instead of 'partner reading'. Research question 4 related items 'teacher is

demonstrating the use of glossary' was replaced with 'the teacher is guiding the students to use glossary', while another related item of the same question was added 'to give practice of summarizing the reading text by teacher'. Consequently, the content validity index was calculated of structured observation 'performance check list' and found to be 0.95.

Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected in fifteen days. The selected teachers and their school administration were consented previously. Two observations were conducted each day because each participant of the study was observed for 60 minutes per day. The researcher herself conducted all the 30 observations for ensuring consistency in data. Three days consecutive observations were made of each participant of the study to avoid any threat of history or maturation etc.

Data Analysis Procedure

Descriptive statistics frequencies, and percentages were used to analyze and interpret the data. For interpretation of data, evaluation criteria (see table 2) was coined to summarize the information in meaningful way. The occurrence of teaching reading strategies or otherwise measured on dichotomous scale but importance was given to frequency of occurrence of the strategies during 30 observations. Hence the final evaluation criteria were, 'the performance percentage between 0% was interpreted as 'never observance of the listed strategy'; $\geq 1\%$ and ≤ 30 frequency percentage was interpreted as rarely; $\geq 31\%$ and $\leq 65\%$ as sometimes while $\geq 66\%$ was interpreted to practice the strategy often by the early grade teachers in English language classroom.

Results and Discussion

To answer the four given research questions, in the light of evaluation criteria given above, data and results are presented graphically to be easier to understand, consequently to be convincing for the audience.

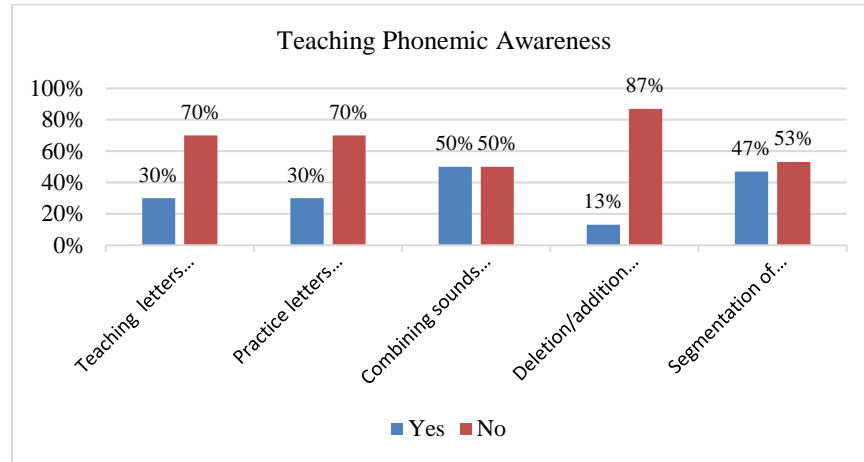


Figure1: Strategies used by teachers for Teaching Phonemic awareness

Figure 1 shows that the English language early grades teachers while teaching phonemic awareness, use rarely (30%) letters sounds association strategy, give rare practice (30%) to students for associating letter-sound. Further, they use the two strategies helpful for ‘word recognition’ sometimes, like combining sounds (50%) and also segmentation of letters-sounds (47%), while rare use of addition and deletion of sounds to make new words in the classroom.

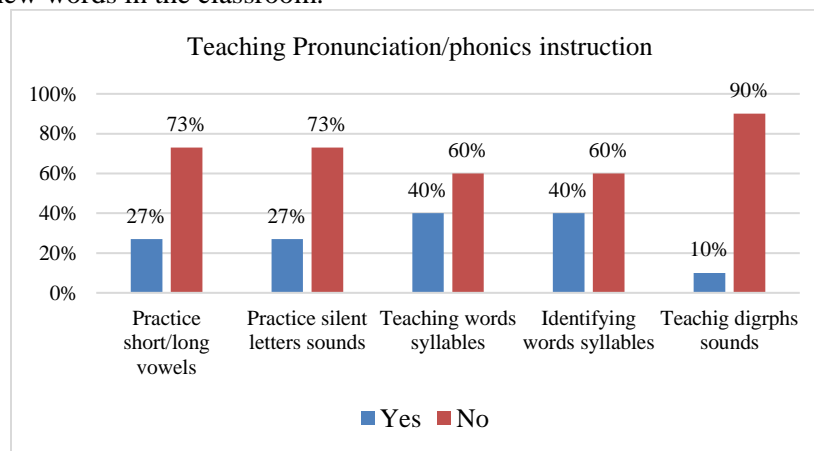


Figure2: Strategies used by teachers for Teaching Pronunciation

Figure 2 represents that for pronunciation or phonics instruction, early grades teachers rarely practice (27%) short and long vowels as well as of silent letters sounds; while practice to teach or identify syllables of the

word recognition sometimes (40%); and use of digraphs sounds in the beginning or at the end of the words are very least (10 %) used as teaching correct pronunciation or phonics instruction to the early graders in English language classroom. The frequency percentage of missing the use of recommended strategies for word recognition is very critical having far reaching effects on the learning achievements of the early graders.

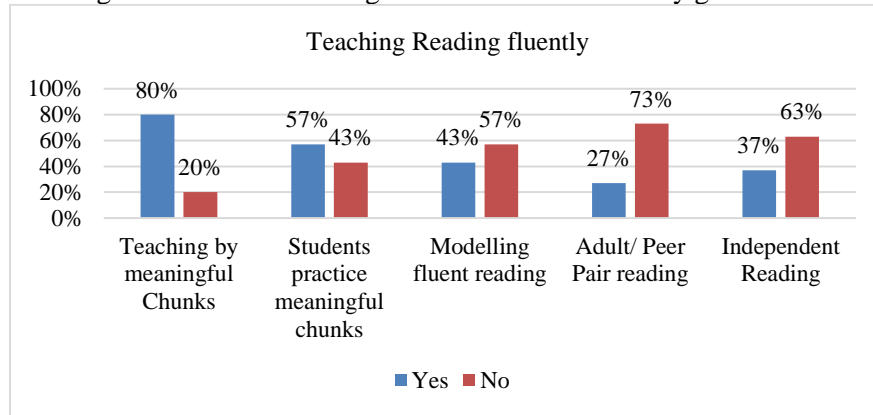


Figure3: Strategies used by teachers for Teaching Reading Fluency

Figure 3 displays that fluency related strategies which are obviously necessary for understanding text by the early graders are being used often (80% times) in terms of chunking, while modelling for early graders which is essential done ‘sometimes’ (43%), however peer reading and independent reading strategies for developing fluency are rarely used (27% and 37% times) respectively for making students fluent readers which ultimately enhances their interest in reading and consequently they become efficient and success independent learners.

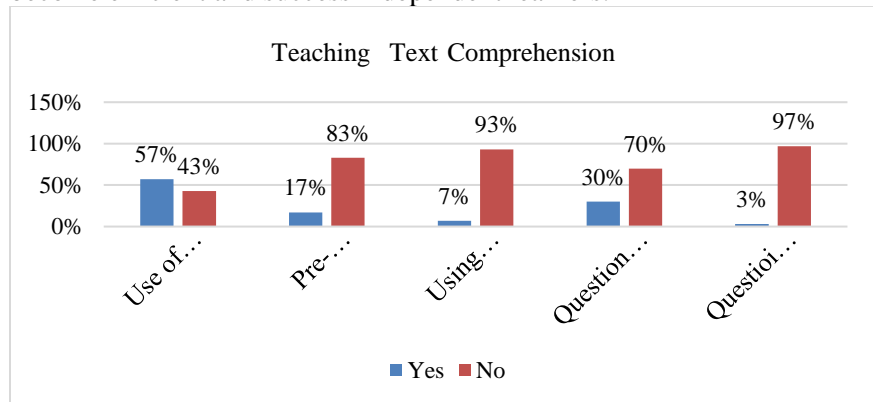


Figure4: Strategies used by teachers for Teaching Text Comprehension

Figure 4 shows that the early grade teachers almost equally use(50%) scientifically research based text comprehension strategies like ‘use of glossary /dictionary’ and very rarely use(17%, 30% and 3% pre, during and after questioning respectively as comprehension developing strategy while teaching reading to the early graders. A very alarming finding is very rare use(3% times) of illustrations which according to Krashen theory of second language acquisition are effectively and efficiently helpful for understanding instructional text; idea or story etc., even independently. Questioning after completion of the assigned reading almost missing (97% times) and pre reading questioning is also disappearing (93% times) which results in absence of curiosity and missing questioning after reading puts doubt on the comprehension; the reason of reading, of text by the early graders in English language classrooms.

Discussion

The results of data about teaching of the ‘phonemic awareness’ in reading strategies showed that teachers used sometimes (31%) research-based teaching reading strategies for developing phonemic awareness among early grade students. Phonemic awareness is important for learners’ word reading, learning spelling and reading comprehension (Armbruster et al., 2001). So, inappropriate application of teaching reading strategies leaves poor effect on developing of students’ phonemic awareness and phonics. It seems that early grade teachers are deficit in skills and knowledge about research-based teaching reading strategies because 9 out of 30 times the early grade English language teachers follow the related standard practices but 21times out of 30 (69%) they do not apply the given research-based teaching reading strategies for developing phonemic awareness among the early grade students.

Ability to pronounce words correctly enhances early graders confidence and later makes them independent reader (Chintha, et. al., 2008). But only almost one third of their teachers gave them practice on vowels and silent letters sound and majority is missing to use the research based effective strategies for the purpose. Whereas those teachers did not apply the syllables strategies for identification and their practicing, 60 times while did not give practice 90 times to digraphs in different words. Thus, missing the use of word parts strategies, is alarming to produce good readers particularly for developing literacy skills among the early graders.

Fluency bridges gap between reading and comprehension (Armbruster; Lehr; Osborn; and Adler, 2001) and those who are fluent

read with expression' and put confidence in their performance on reading activities. The results showed that 80% times the early grade teachers used chunking strategy in primary classroom language teaching. It reflects that during teaching English reading to early grades only 68% of times, teachers use the strategy of reading with expression, whereas 32% times they missed it. Further 'peer reading strategy' is addressed just (34%) of times by the early grade teachers, thus majority (73% times) missed it to use meaningfully. Whereas 63% of times they did not apply the independent reading which is research based for developing practice of repeated reading among the early grade students.

Comprehension which results in learning, i.e., the desired changes in reader's behaviour to survive, to learn, and to read for pleasure (Wallace, 2003) while enhanced skills for text comprehension also base on the word recognition, and fluency etc. (Kuhn & Rasinki, 2007). But the results of current study presented a dismal picture in terms of questioning like easy and tested strategy to be used in enhancing readers' curiosity and for having feedback as whether students comprehended the assigned reading text effectively. But missing frequency percentage (90 times) was very alarming and confirmed the results of ASER Pakistan (2018) that only 23% students of grade 3 comprehended an English passage of four lines. The use of pre reading question as comprehension developing strategy, and particularly at the end of completion of reading for feedback the after questioning is very important but the practicing teachers were missing these strategies, hence remained unable to get the desired results as report in various ASER report, 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2018. Last but not least the use of illustrations for having concentration and arousing interest among the early graders were being missed by the language teachers in the Public schools' classrooms.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are drawn on the bases of results and their interpretations.

- i) Early grade teachers' performance on letter-sounds association, addition/deletion of letters to form new words and segmentation of letter-sounds for phonemic awareness was poor, hence lacking in the very basic component of reading skills, would have serious repercussions on the literacy skills of the young learners. It further reflected that either the early grade teachers were unaware even of the importance of phonemic awareness or were unable to use scientifically research-based strategies of teaching phonemic awareness.

- ii) As far as teaching strategies for ‘developing pronunciation’ are concerned almost more than half of language teaching practices did not include the scientifically tested strategies for enabling students to pronounce words correctly. The results were evident that work on vowels, syllables and digraphs was not even half-half while more times these strategies were missing in early grades classroom, to be applied for helping students to be good at pronouncing words and resultantly to be confident readers.
- iii) The third question is related to ‘teaching reading strategies for fluency among early graders but on the basis of results, it is concluded that teachers often used chunking in reading for fluency and almost half of the practices included application of modelling by teachers or brilliant students to the language learners’ fluent readers. Simultaneously more than half of the practices helpful for fluency were missing like peer reading and independent reading among the early graders which in the long run essential for informed decision making and social awareness among the present early graders.
- iv) Conclusion related to research question 4 is based on the findings that early grade teachers sometimes applied recommended strategies for developing habit of using glossary/dictionary among early grade students. Teachers often used dictionary for the meanings of words rather than developing habits among the early graders to use the glossary given in the text book at its end. Further is concluded that teachers rarely used pre-reading questioning, after reading questioning and students rarely raised relevant questions in their early grade classes. Whereas summarizing the text at the end of the lesson was out of fashion and never being done by teachers and students. In fact, comprehension being the reason for reading, seemed to be compromised by the early grade teachers as evidenced by the results of the study.

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Citation of this Article:

Zaman, S., & Asghar, S. (2019). Evaluation of teaching reading strategies used by early grade teachers. *Journal of Early Childhood Care and Education*, 3, 27-42.