

Analysis of Quality of Reading Literacy Skills of Students in Formal Primary Schools and Non-Formal Basic Schools

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Abstract

Literacy acquisition and enhancement is the core of all debates of multiple educational forums nationally and internationally. Primary level is considered most important for literacy skills development. Formal and non-formal institutes are playing their roles separately. Out of basic literacy skills, reading skill is an important area which was explored in this study. This was a comparative study on basic literacy skills (reading skills) of primary level learners from formal education and Non-formal Basic Education Schools (NFBES). The aim was to assess the quality of reading skills among students in both school systems and identify any significant differences in reading achievement. The researcher selected 100 students from both types of schools, 50 from each. Participants' skill was assessed using a test designed to measure their reading ability. Findings indicate that while students from formal schools performed slightly better in reading, the gap in achievement between the two groups was not statistically significant. The results emphasize the need for targeted interventions to improve reading skills, particularly in non-formal school settings. The study highlights the role of teacher training and curriculum development in addressing literacy gaps.

Keywords: *Literacy, Reading Skills, Non-Formal Education, Formal Education, Quality of Reading Literacy Skills*

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Introduction

Literacy, specifically the ability to read, forms the foundation for learning and personal development. Reading is a critical skill that influences a child's academic performance across all subjects. In Pakistan, literacy rates remain low, with many children, especially in rural or underprivileged areas, struggling to meet reading standards. Formal education and non-formal education play a significant role in providing literacy to children who might not have access to regular schooling (Baguma & Okecho, 2010; Ihejirika, 2000).

Pakistan is a developing country which is struggling in the field of education to improve its literacy rate and make an independent and effective human resource. It is the need for time to focus on research in the field of literacy attainment. According to UNESCO (2008) “a person is literate who can with full understanding, both read and write a short, simple statement on his/her everyday life”. Even though literacy begins by the acknowledgement of letters and calculation, its value lies in the implementation of these abilities to communicate, active participation and lifelong learning in social, political and economic life. Considering the definition of literacy, its practical characteristics and standards differ from culture to culture and country to country, dependent on the development of the entire society and the level of education. The following definition of literacy rate assessment, highlights its functional significance, put forward by the UNESCO expert meeting:

“Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate, compute and use printed, and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society” (UNESCO, 2005).

Some countries have adopted conventional or simple literacy definitions, including 3Rs, namely numeracy, writing and reading. In China, a literate individual must master a vocabulary of 2000 words or more. In the USA literate people, be able to read poems, stories and novels, learn and use maps, tables and charts, fill in daily use forms, write applications and calculate as many as 4 digits. In Belize, at least seven years of elementary school education will count as literacy (NLC, 2007).

Reading is a basic skill that shapes children's learning experiences. According to De-Oliveira (2024):

Reading is widely recognized as the most crucial skill to acquire. It involves a complex process of extracting and constructing meaning

from written language. Moreover, its impact on students' lives extends to learning, cognitive development, academic achievements, success across various school subjects, and problem-solving abilities.

According to UNESCO (2006), literacy involves the ability to read, write, and perform numeracy tasks, with reading being the cornerstone of all learning. A strong foundation in reading is linked to better performance in other academic areas, such as writing and numeracy (Karis, 2014). Research indicated importance of reading and its assessment in different aspects including reading comprehension and its levels (Febrijanto, et al (2022). International assessments like PISA and TIMSS have shown that students with higher reading skills are more likely to succeed academically.

Literacy not only helps individuals to develop or learn personally, but also helps to learn cultures so they can play their part in community and societies at bigger level. (Rintaningrum, 2009) The benefits of literacy can be categorized as human development, political awareness, cultural participation, social contribution and economic benefits. The benefits a human can get from literature are associated to different aspects. Some of them are self-development, empowerment, critical reflection and creativity. All these aspects increase the participation in different literacy programmes. These benefits are valuable in nature and may prove to be an instrument to realize other benefits of learning (GMR,2006). Different studies show that positive impact of self-development. Different literacy programmes were conducted in India, the United States, Brazil, Nigeria, South Asian and African countries. Their reports show the improved self-development due to literacy. In 1990, Bown reviewed 44 studies on literacy training and provided many examples of behavioural changes (Canieso-Doronila,1996).

Once children come to be a good reader in primary level, they are more expected to become better learner during the school year and elsewhere. According to the five reading description areas of the National Literacy Institute: Phonemic awareness (capable of hearing, recognizing and manipulating individual sounds, phonemes, and spoken language). Phonics (helping children learn the relationship between written language and spoken language). Fluency (reading ability, the text is accurate and fast). Vocabulary (reading vocabulary refers to the words we recognize or use in printing. Words we must know to communicate effectively) Comprehension (understanding the purpose for reading) of these elements help all children become successful readers (Armbruster, Lehr & Osborn, 2006).

Reading articulation depends on the improvement and growth of numerous altered skills (Leppänen et al., 2008). Learner who wants to read effectively should focus on the following primary three main elements. They can use sound spelling connections to identify printed words and have visual vocabulary tracks. They can use previous knowledge, vocabulary and understanding strategies to read meaning. They read with Articulation, which means they can quickly recognize words so that understanding the reading and reading itself is pleasurable (HEC, 2012).

“Reading literacy is understanding, using, reflecting on and engaging with written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society” (Fleischman et al., 2010).

Samuels and Kamil (1988) stresses on behaviour as a retort to the word recognition of printed words. “Little attempt was made to explain what went on within the recesses of the mind that allowed the human to make sense of the printed page”. Otherwise stated, text understanding comprises the meaning of words to get the sense of the expressions (Anderson & Pearson, 1994). Reading is a collaborative process that includes insinuation, knowing the accurate sound and Conceptions (Kamhi & Catts, 2008). Today, the primary system allied with bottom-up reading method is called phonics, in this, learner requisite to match the letters to the sounds in the distinct sequence. Permitting that, reading is a direct practice in which the reader decodes text, makes phrases from these words and then sentences (Kucer, 1987). Reading text must be available in schools on walls, libraries and classrooms etc. A study by Frimpong (2021) indicated importance of story books and reading materials in urban private schools

Pakistan has struggled with low literacy rates, and students, particularly in the early grades, often lag in reading proficiency. ASER (2016) report revealed that a significant percentage of 3rd-grade children could not read sentences at the 2nd-grade level, indicating that reading deficits persist through primary education. Formal schools generally have better resources and trained teachers, which could lead to better reading outcomes compared to non-formal schools, where resources are scarce, and teacher training is limited.

Non-formal basic education is to provide educational opportunities to children who cannot attend regular schools. However, the quality of education, particularly in literacy, has been a subject of concern. Studies show that non-formal education often lacks structured curricula, well-trained teachers, and learning materials, which may negatively impact students' reading skills (Ministry of Education, 2001). The focus of this

study is on Islamabad Capital Territory, where the literacy rates and educational outcomes have been suboptimal, particularly among students in non-formal basic schools. Non-formal education has emerged as a solution to cater to children outside the formal system, but the quality of education in these schools remains a concern. This study focuses on the comparative analysis of reading skills between students in formal primary schools & Non formal Basic Schools to determine quality of literacy instruction and attainment. This study aims to explore these differences in the context of reading skills among 4th-grade students.

Statement of the Problem

Literacy opens a variety of new opportunities for people and people with low levels of literacy may have limited opportunities in life to grow. It is much needed to focus on research in the field of literacy attainment. As compared with other basic literacy skills, the ability to read proficiently is equally essential for academic success and long-term personal development. The problem under investigation is to explore and analyze the literacy skills of primary level students to read proficiently. Formal Education cannot accommodate all the primary level students due to many reasons. That is where non-formal education comes to play its part. Research studies show that non-formal education has filled the gaps which were left opened by formal education. Given the disparity in resources, curriculum, and teaching methods between primary level schools from formal education and Non formal Basic Schools from the capital city of Pakistan, it is crucial to investigate whether these differences affect reading skills among students. This study aims to evaluate the reading abilities of 4th graders from both types of schools, with the goal of identifying gaps and suggesting improvements in educational policies and teaching practices.

Objective and Hypothesis

The objective of this study was to make a comparison between the reading skills of primary level learners from formal education and NFBES.

H01: There is no significant difference between the reading skills of reading skills of primary level learners from formal education and NFBES.

Research Methodology

This was a quantitative study and survey was used. Research tool was comprised of achievement test prepared by the researcher to find out the

attainment in reading skills of primary level learners from formal education and NFBES from 4th grade (who have completed 4-year primary education) of both school systems were taken for the study.

Research Design

A mixed method (causal comparative and descriptive) research was conducted for the present study. For this purpose, primary schools from formal education and non-formal basic education were selected. The age category of population ranged between 9-12 years old, who have completed their primary schooling grade 4th and were currently studying in 5th grade. Literacy achievement of students was tested with respect to the competencies proposed in national curricula, instead of using content of 4th grade textbooks for test construction and with the help of literacy experts and field teachers. The test was comprised of three sections including reading skills only and the test was developed based on the national and UNESCO literacy definition

Participants

Population and Sample

In this research, participants were 100 4th graders (who have completed four years of education and were studying in 5th class with age ranges 9-12 years). Participants were selected purposively as there were certain selection criteria from them. Whole population was taken as sample due to the required characteristics of this study in terms of age, skills, class and knowledge etc. but result was not 100% due to absence of some students, so 50 students were taken who have completed 4th class of formal primary school and 50 students were taken of 4th class who have completed non-formal school. So, a total number of 100 students were selected in sample 50 students from each school (50 students from NFBECS and 50 from formal education) in Islamabad.

Research Tool

Instrument Framework

Guidelines of National Curriculum 2018 were followed while constructing reading assessment test of the participants. While constructing reading achievement test, some considerations were kept in mind that:

- i. Only such items should be constructed and prepared which were based on reading skills.
- ii. For better grading procedures, multiple choice items were used.

Instrument Development

The test consisted of Reading skills only.

- i. Urdu is the national language of Pakistan and most of the students had grasp over the basics of this language. The first level was reading the sentences. The students read it slowly or made two to three mistakes in reading the sentences correctly. The marking was depended on the fluency of reading the text as a sentence and not as a string of words.
- ii. If the child read the sentences fluently and with ease, then he/she should be asked to read the paragraph. If the child could read the paragraph, he/she was considered at the highest level.

The students who could not read the sentences with affluence were considered for third level. The students were allowed to pick from the strings of words and read 5 options. The student who correctly read 4 choices was considered at the beginner level.

Research Instruments

A researcher/teacher-made achievement test was developed with help and guidance of the teachers who were teaching the primary level students. The test comprised of three sections including reading, writing and numeracy skills. The researcher conducted the test for those students who were studying in 5th class (Completed 4-years primary education).

Validity and Reliability of Tools

The validity of the research tool was examined in consultation with literacy experts and field teachers. Their recommendations were valued and incorporated before pilot testing. The test was given to students. I did also a pilot study to check out any vagueness in the developed version. It was intended to determine clarity and appropriateness of the developed item for target sample. The sample of the pilot study consisted of 10 formal primary school students and 10 non- formal school students who have completed the 4th class. The analysis of data with reference to tool reliability and validity using SPSS16 and Cronbach's alpha was calculated for item correlation. Following is the result of pilot testing:

Table 1

Alpha Coefficient reliability literacy skills scale & sub-scale (N=20)

The following table explains the reliability of literacy skills instrument.

Scale	Item	Alpha Coefficient
Literacy skills	23	.79*

Table1 shows the overall reliability of literacy skills instrument. Alpha reliability of Literacy skill was .79*.

Data Collection

Data was collected personally and analyzed in terms of descriptive and inferential statistics.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Table 2

Overall Literacy skills of NFBES students versus formal education students (N=100)

	Type of Institute	N	Mean	S.D	t-value	D.f.	Sig
“Overall Literacy Skills”	NFBES	50	14.90	5.75	2.66	82.4	.009
	FE	50	17.46	3.61			

In the above table, results on the overall literacy skills of primary level students of FE and NFBES are elaborated. Overall, there is a significant difference between literacy skills of students of both types of schools ($p < .009$, t-value 2.66). The mean scores of both types of institutes indicate that formal schools are doing a better job (Mean=17.46) than non-formal schools (Mean=14.90) in enhancement of literacy skills of learners. Overall, it is apparent from this table that the role of formal education primary schools is more than Basic NFE schools.

Table 3

Comparison between reading skills of NFBES students versus formal education students (N=100)

	Type of Institute	N	Mean	S.D	t-value	D.f.	Sig
Reading Skill	Formal (FE)	50	2.54	6.76	1.57	93.7	.119
	Non-Formal (NFBES)	50	2.30	8.39			

As per this table, results of t-test on reading ability of NFBES students versus formal education students are elaborated. Results in the table indicates that there is no significant difference between reading ability of formal education students versus NFBES students ($p > .119$). the t-value is 1.57, however, significance level is statistically non-significant $p < 0.05$ which indicates that in comparison between reading skills of NFBES students versus formal education students there was no significant difference. We can also see it from the mean differences of respondents from both types of schools' students as formal primary education students' Mean=2.54 is lower than mean score of non-formal school students Mean=2.30. So, this indicates that formal school respondents and non-formal basic school respondents were equal in reading skill. That's why the null hypothesis 'There is no significant difference between the reading skills of primary level students at formal primary school versus non-formal basic schools.' is accepted.

Table 4

Reading skill on different levels of NFBES students versus formal education students (N=100)

Variable		Reading Skill Levels			
		Beginner	Moderate	Higher	Total
Schools	Formal School	5	13	32	50
	Non-Formal School	12	11	27	50
Total		17%	24%	59%	100

The above table shows the different levels of reading skill of formal and non-formal schools. Results indicate that in sub-scale 'Reading Skill' formal school respondents (Beginner Level= 5%, Moderate Level=13 & Higher Level=32) and non-formal school respondents (Beginner Level = 12, Moderate Level=11 & Higher Level=27) respectively. But this difference was not statistically significant.

Findings and Discussion

The study focused on making a comparison between the reading skills of NFBES students versus formal education students. Regarding overall literacy skills development, the result of the data analysis showed that there is a significant difference between reading skills of NFBES students versus formal education students. It is apparent from the results that

nonformal schools are playing less role in overall literacy skill development as compared to formal school students or vice versa.

The result of the data analysis also showed that statistically non-significant difference between reading skills of NFBES students versus formal education students.

- The t-value (1.57) and $p > .119$ above the statistically significant level 0.05.
- The formal primary school students scored (Mean=2.54, SD=6.76) and non-formal basic school students scored (Mean=2.30, SD=8.39).
- So, in comparison between reading skills of NFBES students versus formal education students there was no significant difference. Based on the result null hypothesis no. H_0^1 'There is no significance difference between formal and non-formal education school system regarding attaining reading skills in 4th grade students' was accepted.

Present research concentrated on exploration reading skills of NFBES students versus formal education students. First, I will discuss reading and sub skills of literacy. Study results indicated that overall, there is a significant difference between literacy skills of students of both types of schools ($p < .009$, t-value 2.66). The mean scores of both types of institutes indicate that formal schools are doing a better job (Mean=17.46) than non-formal schools (Mean=14.90) in enhancement of literacy skills of learners. Overall, it is apparent from this table that the role of formal education primary schools is more than Basic NFE schools.

Similar study has indicated findings. According to the results of research conducted by Jha (2013), the 3Rs skills have positive and fundamental significances from literacy programs.

Another finding regarding overall literacy skills development, the result of the data analysis showed that there is a significant difference between non-formal and formal school students. According to Essays, UK (2018), that is because formal schools are more organized than non-formal schools. They have a fixed curriculum and a limited time period to cover the syllabus, while NFE has continuous learning process and cafeteria types of curricula with flexible and varied choices. One of the other studies, Mahiri and Sablo (1996) concluded that formal school students have more experience in writing as they have enriched course work, whereas non-formal students do not have that much exposure to structured course work and hence they fear to write in school.

This research aimed to compare reading skills of NFBES students versus formal education students of grade 4. This study result showed that non-formal school students were equal to formal school students in reading skills. Since, formal school respondents and non-formal basic school respondents were equal in reading skill. That's why the null hypothesis 'There is no significant difference between the reading skills

of primary level students at formal primary school versus non-formal basic schools.' is accepted. These results are supported by a study conducted by Walgermo and Solheim (2018) shows that reading skills are based on self-concept rather than literacy interest. That is the reason formal and non-formal students were on the same page on the reading skills. Some mega studies conducted on national level also indicated importance of literacy skills and training. In this regard, in 2015, Manitoba Education and advanced learning (Canada) carried out literacy skills research. The results showed that student performance reflected cumulative growth, enhanced teaching and improved students' learning ability. Piper, Zuilkowski and Mugenda (2014) stated in their research findings that non formal students have shown improvements in reading skills.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Overall literacy skills development between non-formal and formal school students is not equal as role of formal education primary schools is more than Basic NFE schools in enhancing overall literacy skills. However, regarding reading literacy skills both institutions are playing significant positive roles and there is no difference between these two types of institutes. The students of NFBES students and formal education students did not differ in reading literacy skill and exhibit equal amount of proficiency in reading. So, it is concluded that reading skill is promoted by formal as well as non-formal schools on equal basis.

Recommendations

1. Keeping in view of the findings of the study, it is recommended that a proper plan of action may be devised at upper level by government stakeholders to promote literacy skills' acquisition opportunities a non-formal basic education school. As low level of literacy skills in NFBES may be an indication of improper physical and other literacy related facilities in NFBES.
2. In a formal school system, the learning needs of students may be acknowledged regarding reading skill and there may be joint study groups on occasional basis between formal and non-formal education students, so that they may learn from peer interaction as well.
3. In a non-formal school system, the learning needs of students should be assessed according to their focus on the learning skill.
4. In a formal school system, learning by doing and learning with discipline should be encouraged.
5. In a Non formal school system, it is suggested that learning by doing should be encouraged for better understanding of Literacy (reading, writing & numeracy) concepts.

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