



RESEARCH PAPER

**English Language Reading Comprehension of Pakistani
HSSC/HSC Level Students: Perceptions and Performance**

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ABSTRACT

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This mixed method research investigation was conducted to determine the differences in reading skills performance between the Federal Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education (FBISE) and the Board of Intermediate Education Karachi (BIEK). Quantitative data were collected through reading comprehension tests, and qualitative data were collected through focus group interviews to achieve the study objective. Sample of this study consisted of 60 students - 30 from each board and English faculty from the selected college. The reading tests were analyzed using SPSS (V.24), and Saldaña's (2013) thematic analysis was used for focus group interviews. The findings indicated that Federal Board (FBISE) students performed better than Karachi Board (BIEK) in reading comprehension tests. Student focus group interviews reveal that students' performance highly depends on the students' reading interest, prescribed course books reading, and teachers' guidelines. The English language teachers' focus group interviews conclude that students' performance relies on their urge to seek knowledge and their approach to reading books. The teachers also believe curriculum and assessment procedure at the HSSC/HSC level also play an important role in the learners' reading performance.

Introduction

Pakistan is a linguistically diversified and rich country; it has seventy-two living languages. Urdu is the national language of Pakistan and English language is used as an official language (Rahman, 2007). The English language has remained a pivotal, esteemed, status quo, and reputable language in Pakistani society since independence (Shamim, 2008). Despite, its esteemed and high reputation in the country, only three to four percent of the Pakistani population can speak the English language with proficiency (Rahman, 2007). Pakistani students mostly lack two major

skills: reading and writing. These deficiencies are quite interlinked with inadequate teaching techniques and prescribed textbooks (Aftab, 2011) and the examination system of Pakistan which is not only outmoded but also does not have the state to assess the performance of students comprehensively. The examination system examines only the memory and rote learning of students (Ahmad, I, Rehman, K.U., Ali, A, Khan, I, Khan, F.A., 2014, p.80). Rote learning is the only mode to assess students in SSC (Secondary School Certificate) and HSC (Higher Secondary Certificate) in Pakistan and this rote learning continues when they move towards tertiary education (Ahmed, A & Ahmad, N., 2017) resulting in weak receptive and productive skills (Christie & Afzaal, 2005)

The English language reading comprehension is an essential skill for Pakistani students because it is a medium of instruction, a compulsory subject from the school level to the graduate level, most of the text and reference books are in English, majority of the websites offer written content in English. Moreover, most of the research papers in Pakistan and internationally are in English, and many national and international magazines and newspapers are in English. It is very crucial to make Pakistani students realize that reading skills have a significant role both in their academic and professional life. Reading is one of the most important language skills for those who learn English as a second or foreign language or for academic or professional success (Dorkchandra, 2010).

Literature Review

Reading skills are considered an integral and lifelong skill because of their need (Küçüköğlü, H., 2013). They are receptive skills (Bhatti, 2016), and the goal *“is to construct text meaning based on visually encoded information”* (Koda, 2007, p.1). Reading is considered a self-discovery and an interactive process. In this process, the reader reads the material by using both cognitive and metacognitive strategies to gain new knowledge and meaning. (Hellyer, Robinson, & Sherwood, 2001; Kalayci, 2012). Scott and Saaiman (2016) also state that *“reading is an indispensable skill and is fundamentally interrelated with educational success (p. 2)”*.

Reading also helps the reader to gain new information and to learn new concepts. The main purpose of reading is to expose *“the students to new vocabulary, new sentences, and different registers”*. Reading also guides the learner to use the language in different ways. Reading is a mandatory ingredient of language learning because it helps the students to study all other subjects and gain good marks (Karanja 2015).

Comprehension on the other side is a product that comes out in the form of a mental representation of the textual information when readers are done with the reading. (Duke and Pearson, 2002). Readers must have a certain range of abilities and capacities to understand the text. The capacities include (i) cognitive capacities that are based on learners' attention, memory, critical analytic ability, inferencing, visualization ability, (ii) motivation (a purpose for reading, an interest in the content being read, self-efficacy as a reader), (iii) and various types of knowledge included vocabulary, domain and topic knowledge, linguistic and discourse knowledge, knowledge of specific comprehension strategies. Reading comprehension is among the basic and mandatory skills that should be taught to learners in the first years of elementary school (Papatga & Ersoy, 2016) because reading comprehension is all

about understanding and getting the clear views or messages that the writer wants to convey intentionally to his readers (May, & Rizzardi, 2002).

The purpose of reading comprehension is to relate new information with the previous knowledge and expand the knowledge. English language teachers do play a significant role in creating an environment for students where students can learn more and improve their performance in reading comprehension skills. They should teach students reading strategies and encourage them to read and have them practice reading comprehension through exercises that will ultimately help them enhance their reading comprehension. (Muliawati; 2017). On the other side, students themselves do not find interest in reading due to over-dependency on electronic and social devices, students do not enjoy and experience pleasure while reading the books. They prefer to read the précis of the books, and stories novel than self-reading, and ultimately, they encounter problems at their higher level of education due to poor reading comprehension skills (Boakye, 2012; Niven, 2005).

Material and Methods

Sample

Sixty students of HSSC pre-medical students and four English lecturers from a selected college participated in this study. Thirty students were from the Federal Board (FBISE) and thirty students from the Karachi0 Board (BIEK) two intact groups of XII Pre Medical. Moreover, four English language teachers and twenty students took part in semi-structured interviews.

Table 1
Participants of Semi-Structured Interviews

Participants' Information	No. of participants
English Teachers	4
Federal Board Students	10
Karachi Board Students	10

Table 1
Participants for Quantitative Data

Name of Boards	No. of participants	Discipline
Federal Board	30	Pre-Medical
Karachi Board	30	Pre-Medical

Research Instruments

The interview protocol was developed and sent to four experienced English lecturers for expert validation. The experts' recommendations were incorporated before data collection. The qualitative data were collected through semi-structured focus group interviews with twenty students and four English language teachers in the college. The interviews were transcribed and the member checking technique was employed.

Data for this mixed-method study were collected with the help of reading comprehension tests and semi-structured interviews. To assess the reading performance of the students, reading passages were adapted from the Cambridge website (<https://papacambridge.com/>). The passages measured vocabulary, summary, inferences, and factual information

Ethical Consideration

The ethical consideration was also adhered to, consent of the participants was taken, and participants and college identities is kept confidential all participants were assigned a code as discussed in the findings section.

Results and Discussion

This section covers both qualitative and quantitative findings. The first part comprises qualitative findings based on the data collected from four focus group students' interviews and one focus group English Language teacher's interview. The data collected through interviews were categorized and analysed according to Seldana's (2009) proposed thematic analysis.

Students' Perceptions

Students' perceptions were recorded through focus group interviews. Each group consisted of 5 students; hence four groups of students had twenty members. Two groups of students represented FBISE and the other two were from BIEK. Students' perceptions have been categorized into four major themes: teaching reading skills, reading practice, reading challenges, and students' preferred reading topics. For participants anonymity codes were assigned to participants: Students from the Federal Board were assigned FBISES with numerical 1 to 10 and students from the Karachi board were given BIEKS code with numerical 1 to 10. For example, the response of Federal board students was recorded as FBISES1, on the other hand, the response of Karachi board students was recorded as BIEKS1.

Teaching Reading Skills

According to students, teachers help them to read passages and learn new vocabulary FBISES2, *"the teacher helped us through vocabulary and its meanings"*, FBISES3, *"teacher helped us through the passage, it helped us to explain the meaning moreover, the teacher used to explain the passage and we read it"*.

However, some of the students highlighted that they were not given equal attention in reading class, rather the students who were already good at reading skills were asked to read the paragraph aloud and the rest were just listeners. The students further mentioned that even comprehension questions (oral questions in class) were also asked from the students who had good comprehension. FBISES1, *"Teachers prefer those students who are confident enough to read [aloud in class] and later on she explains the paragraph. They (teachers) used to ask questions from those students who were able to give answers of the comprehension"*.

A few of the Karachi Board's students stated that the teacher guided them in reading. The teacher explained the key points of the chapter before reading the text

and each paragraph was explained, which helped them to comprehend the chapter. BIEKS3, *"Teachers used to teach the chapter like a story that helps us to remain in our mind"*.

Reading Practice

Most students limit their reading to textbooks only and the purpose of reading was to prepare for exams and get good marks. FBISES3, *"we practice our reading skills through textbooks because I think at this stage we don't need other external knowledge or extra knowledge because we go through federal board paper just to gain marks & nothing else. So we go through textbook only"*.

Karachi Board students highlighted that they usually do the reading practice in the class under the supervision of the English teacher and take help from the teacher in word meaning and also consult a dictionary. BIEKS6, *"The basic thing in reading is difficult vocabulary. First, we take out that word & write its meanings. If we are not able to remember those words, we memorize the meaning of that particular word. That is the way I do things"*.

However, some students read from different sources on the internet to improve their reading skills. FBISES2: *"I search on the internet & I watch movies with subtitles so that I get to know about new words & also search about them that's how I practice reading skills"*.

Reading Challenges

While sharing the difficulties usually they face in reading class, students considered vocabulary the most difficult part. FBISES1, *"There were some difficult words, & difficult phrases in the book and that were difficult to understand"*.

Students' Preferred Reading Topics

According to FBISE and BIEK students, they like those chapters which are based on science and fiction.

SK3, *"there were some chapters that were quite informative like science & scientist & there were some chapters that were so boring ... & there was a novel, the prisoner of Zenda was too much interesting"*.

Students also liked those stories and poems that carry the moral at the end. Students also liked the chapters that had a moral. BIEKS8, *"I like two chapters: The Devoted Friend, in that chapter I have learned that what true friendship is so it was very good and, has moral & 2nd chapter which I liked a lot was The Day the Dam Broke"*. Students demanded more novels should be included in reading BIEKS6, *"In our curriculum, novels should be included. Novels not only freshen our minds but also let us know the meaning of difficult words according to the context."*

Teachers Perceptions

Four English Language teachers from the college, who made the total number of English language teachers, participated in the focus group interview. Like students' focus group interviews, this interview was also recorded, transcribed,

coded, categorized, and analysed according to Seldana's (2009) proposed thematic analysis. The teacher's responses were also recorded and transcribed. The teachers were also assigned a code ET with a number 1-4. Based on thematic analysis these findings are grouped into three main themes i.e. the importance of reading skills, the Examination system, and other problems.

Importance of Reading Skills

The teachers realized the importance of reading skills in language learning. All of them stated that reading skills are important for students ET4: *"Yes reading comprehension skill is one of the most important parts of language learning"*. ET1, *"Yes ..., reading skills are very important in education"* ET3, *"if they are not able to understand what they are reading then they will not be able to reproduce It [language]."* ET3, *"if they [students] are not taking in the language or acquiring the language through reading they definitely would be lacking in giving the output of that language."* Teachers also consider reading comprehension skills important for vocabulary, idea and information development. ET2, *"Developing the habit of reading among students is important ... that would increase their vocabulary. Reading not only will bring more vocabulary but also bring more ideas ... they will be getting a lot of knowledge as well"*.

Examination System

The teachers believe that the weak examination system is also a hurdle in developing students' reading skills. The same questions are usually repeated in exams every year, hence most of the students usually prepare from past papers and do not even read the complete textbook. ET3, *"In BIEK the paper pattern I guess is one of the reasons for the students not having reading habits of the textbook. Because mostly paper is set from past year papers, and students prefer to go for selective study"*.

The teachers further state, Examination system encourages memorization or even reading comprehension answers. ET2, *"the paper pattern doesn't require them [students] to go through the text [text book] simply it requires to memorize a few questions [answers] which are repeated in the past papers."* The last point about the examination system that teachers raised was teachers provided notes. ELT 3, *"students are habitual of spoon-feeding in the form of notes provided by their teachers so they are never put into that task working on the text so when it comes to text and we give them task to read the text they simply get frustrated"*.

Other Problems

The teachers shared students face difficulties in reading comprehension. ET4: *"the answers they [students] write, they [answers] are not according to the questions it shows they are lacking in reading comprehension"*.

Teachers are also of the opinion that extensive reading habit is not developed among students. ET2, *"This habit of reading book other than the course book, this habit is not inculcated in students"*.

Finally, teachers also blamed social media for reducing reading interest among students. ET2, *"we face difficulties in inculcating reading habit and I think the social media... is the big hurdle in this because instead of using their time in*

reading they prefer using social media ... that is the great difficulty for us to motivate students to read a book".ET3, "it is a diversion from the library to social media.

Reading Comprehension Performance

The findings derived from Quantitative data are discussed below:

Table 3
Descriptive Analysis Of Reading Comprehension Test

Groups	No. of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
Federal Board	30	20.1333	2.33021
Karachi Board	30	15.8000	4.52121

As illustrated in table 3, students of FBISE performed better in reading skills with $M=20.1333$, as compared to students of the Karachi board having a mean $M=15.8000$. The standard deviation of FBISE students $SD=2.33021$ is lower also than BIEK students $SD=4.52121$.

Table 4
Independent T-Test Results for Reading Comprehension

Groups	No. of Participants	Mean	Standard Deviation
Federal Board	30	20.1333	2.33021
Karachi Board	30	15.8000	4.52121

The reading comprehension test was analysed through the Independent t-test, the reason to apply the independent t-test was to find out the differences between both boards i.e. FBISE and BIEK in their reading comprehension skills. Table 4 clearly illustrates the p-value (0.004) which is less than 0.005. The results also confirm the t value i.e. 4.333 which is greater than the critical value i.e. 2.021 on the degree of freedom (df) of 58. When the t value is greater than the critical value, the means are statistically different. Keeping in view the independent t-test results, we can state that FBISE students performed better on the reading comprehension test than the BIEK students.

The students of FBISE and BIEK revealed that while teaching reading skills, teachers help them to find out difficult vocabulary and their meanings however, sometimes, according to them, teachers prefer those students aloud reading in class who are good at reading to save time. The same opinion is highlighted by Muliawati, (2017) that teachers do play an essential role in creating an environment for students where students can learn more and improve their performance in reading comprehension skills. He also suggests teachers help students with Reading Comprehension skills and tell the art of finding hidden meaning from text.

Most of the students read textbooks to secure good marks in HSSC/HSC instead improve their reading skills; they also memorize answers for examinations. This notion is also supported by (Ahmad, I, Rehman, K.U., Ali, A, Khan, I, Khan, F.A., 2014) that the examination system only asses students' memory and rote learning. However, some of the students highlighted that they read from different resources such as eBooks or movie subtitles to improve their reading skills.

Students also revealed their preferred reading topics that should be included in their recommended reading texts. They like to read science fiction literature, moralistic stories, and novels. The contents of the books will help them to find pleasure in reading and ultimately their skills will improve. Boakye, (2017) also supported the idea that reading for pleasure can also contribute to enhancing the reading comprehension skills in the classroom.

All English language teachers agreed that reading plays a pivotal role to get the mastery of the language and it has significant effects on students' performance. They also think that reading is one of those important skills that should be given significance from early schooling as it helps the students in their higher studies. The idea of focusing on reading skills from elementary school is also supported by Papatga & Ersoy (2016).

According to the teachers, FBISE students are more independent, self-learners, and good readers than BIEK students. The teachers highlighted that the BIEK HSC examination paper pattern is a major reason for BIEK Students' weak performance because it is based on rote learning. Therefore, most students prepare for exams from past papers by memorizing the question answers to get good marks. Students prefer to prepare English papers either from past papers or guess papers as Rote learning/cramming is the only approach to evaluate students in SSC (Secondary School Certificate) and HSC/HSSC (Higher Secondary Certificate/ Higher Secondary School Certificate) which cause poor language skills (Ahmed, A & Ahmad, N. 2017; Christi & Afzaal, 2005)

Teachers also highlighted other problems: students usually spend most of the time on social media and do not find any pleasure in reading books, which leads to having weak reading skills, all teachers agreed that reading is a complex skill, therefore it should be focused more and more. The quantitative findings of this study revealed that FBISE students' reading performance is better than BIEK students, which is also supported by the teachers' comments as discussed in the above paragraph.

Conclusion

This study concludes that English language teachers help students in Reading comprehension. But, students who are already good at reading skills are usually given more opportunities in reading activities, as compared to the students with less reading skills. Because, reading skills are essential for Pakistani English language learners, hence English language teachers should focus more their reading skills.

Recommendation

This research investigation suggests that teachers should persuade students for pleasure reading and reading for comprehension, instead of reading to pass the examination only. Similarly, recommended reading texts should include topics of students' interest. Furthermore, students struggling in reading comprehension should be guided more in reading comprehension activities.

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