

Pakistani EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Teaching Intensive Reading at University Level: A Qualitative Exploration

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how Pakistani English teachers teach intensive reading at the university level. The research setting was a private university in the province of Punjab, Pakistan, and the research sample included three experienced English teachers. The topic, intensive reading, has received close to no previous research in a Pakistani context; thus, through a qualitative study, the researchers set out to get detailed insight into the topic. Findings revealed that teaching intensive reading is host to countless problems, such as teachers' lack of precise knowledge, students' diverse educational backgrounds, class size, and time constraints. Problems identified in this research can help ELT teachers, administrators and policy makers improve teaching and learning English as a second language in Pakistan. Recommendations for further research include testing the findings of this research with the help of quantitative methods.

Keywords: L2, ESL, EFL, CLT, GTM, ELT

Introduction

Intensive reading is an innovative, research-backed approach that forms part of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) umbrella. Intensive reading and its link to second language (L2) learning is an area that received extensive research and investigation by William Grabe. Grabe (1991) suggests that intensive reading plays an important role in L2 learning, especially for learners trying to learn in academic environments (Grabe, 1991). Intensive reading should, thus, be made an essential component of second language learning sessions. The goal of these reading sessions should be to facilitate students in learning all of the above-discussed skills through intensive reading. If incorporated successfully in language learning sessions, intensive reading can lead learners to higher proficiency and literacy levels (Grabe, 1991).

The above discussion highlights the importance of intensive reading for ESL/EFL contexts and suggests important implications. One significant implication is that intensive reading should be made an essential part of the educational system at all levels in countries where English is spoken and used as a second language. However, this is not always the case. In most ESL/EFL countries, educationists and teachers fail to incorporate intensive reading in English classrooms for various reasons, thereby depriving ESL learners of its numerous benefits (Swan, 2011).

Pakistan, where English has long been used as a second language, faces a similar dilemma (Coleman, 2015). This significant role that intensive reading plays in developing learners' language abilities has been overlooked by teachers and policymakers in Pakistan. The situation is leading to the production of incompetent English users in Pakistan (Ahmad & Rao, 2013). The root of the problem, to a large extent, lies in the fact that reading is generally thought of as a skill that learners can develop independently. Thus, in most educational settings, teachers do not give it the time, attention, and effort it deserves (Muhammad, 2013), and it remains a neglected aspect of learners' education. Secondly, part of the problem is that teaching reading has received little attention and little research in Pakistan. Consequently, there is little evidence of how reading is currently being taught at different levels in Pakistan and what some of the problems and challenges are facing teachers.

Literature Review

In order to learn a language effectively, L2 learners need to take in (input stage) and reproduce (output stage) all three components: extensive, intensive, and analyzed. This is where intensive reading comes in. Intensive reading sessions provide second language learners with opportunities to engage with that component of language learning which Swan (2011) refers to as *intensive*. In these sessions, learners first interact with and carefully analyze short, selected pieces of text; this is the input stage. Later, completing follow-up exercises allows these learners to reuse and recycle the internalized language samples, thereby completing the output stage (Swan, 2011).

Unfortunately, in most ESL/EFL countries, reading lessons are not designed to enable learners to benefit from intensive reading in the manner described above (Swan, 2011). A significant obstacle in this regard is the Grammar Translation Method (GTM). GTM comprises reading sessions in which a teacher goes through the entire text, word by word, highlighting different features in the text like synonyms, antonyms, grammatical items, etc. During such a session, he/she might get students to read aloud and translate some portions of the text. Such a lesson usually ends with students writing countless pieces of information in their notebooks dictated by the teacher (Coleman, 2015). Reading lessons conducted in such a manner are not beneficial as they are not *intensive*. In these, students never get an opportunity to “engage” with language in the real sense. The teacher does the reading, and students are seldom given a chance to read on their own. Consequently, language samples are never assimilated and digested fully, and proper input never occurs. Similarly, at the end of such a lesson, students are given answers to exercises that accompany the text; they are seldom asked to work on them on their own. Thus, language samples are never reproduced. Proper output never takes place; thus, the second language is never consolidated (Swan, 2011).

Various other studies conducted in other ESL/EFL countries identify yet other obstacles that prevent intensive reading components from being successfully integrated into the reading lessons. Cahyono and Widiati (2006) reported that an absence of the right mix of both types of reading, i.e. intensive and extensive, in the curriculum served as a significant setback and prevented the development of language skills in students in Malaysia (Cahyono & Widiati, 2006). On the other hand, Fareh (2010) reported that, in the United Arab Emirates, teachers' lack of qualifications and faulty assessment methods were the significant factors that hampered the successful integration of intensive reading into reading lessons (Fareh, 2010). In light of these problems common to almost all ESL/EFL countries, a study in South Korea sought to test the effectiveness of modern reading techniques like intensive reading by implementing them in ongoing university classrooms. Their findings suggested that instructing students through these techniques improved learners' reading and general language skills (Song, 1998).

Pakistan faces a similar dilemma – teaching reading is fraught with problems. One major obstacle is that reading instruction and the facts, figures, and problems that might be related to it have received little attention and little research (Grabe, 1991). Another major obstacle in Pakistan is the traditional grammar-translation method, the dominant approach for teaching reading throughout the country (Ahmad & Rao, 2013). English is the medium of instruction in private schools and has been taught as a compulsory subject in government schools since year 1 (Coleman, 2015). However, traditional approaches like GTM prevent the proper development of language skills in ESL students and produce incompetent English language users (Ahmad & Rao, 2013).

Some other studies conducted within Pakistan explore reading instruction from various other aspects. One fundamental research, in this regard, is Muhammad (2013memonhoe). The researchers tried to get to the root of the problem by measuring what attitudes/beliefs teachers have about reading and what they actually do in their classrooms. For this, data was collected from 71 teachers in 6 major public sector universities within Pakistan. The results reveal a huge gap between what teachers believe to be right and what they actually implement inside the classroom. 60% of teachers responded that reading instruction should comprise practices and activities backed by research. However, when it came to their classrooms, only 30% of teachers implemented research-backed strategies to teach reading. 70% of teachers still teach reading through traditional methods (Muhammad, 2012).

Another study by Memon and Badger (2007) explored intensive reading instruction through a comparison-contrast approach. This study, which was qualitative, was conducted in different classes of the University of Sindh, Jamshoro. Techniques that are part of the intensive reading approach were implemented in some of the classrooms, and then these new style classrooms were compared with those where reading was being taught through traditional approaches. The findings suggested that in classrooms employing intensive reading techniques, students' performance improved as they had more chances to interact with teachers and classmates. Thus, the new style of classrooms proved to be a more effective reading environment (Memon & Badger, 2007).

Another critical study done by Panezai and Channa (2017) examined problems teachers face in intensive reading instruction from the point of view of textbooks. The study comprised of a sample of 188 primary (grade 1-5) government school teachers from Baluchistan province and employed a mixed-method approach. The findings suggested that textbooks in Pakistan, especially those in government schools, are least suited for teaching intensive reading effectively (Panezai & Channa, 2017).

Material and Methods

After a detailed overview of the definition and the characteristics defining qualitative research, it became apparent that a qualitative study would enable researchers to gain a deeper and richer glimpse into the topic of intensive reading instruction in Pakistan and the related problems. The decision was reinforced after revisiting some previous research work in the Literature Review section. For instance, Muhammad (2012) – a key researcher on the topic of reading instruction in Pakistan – stated that the current literature fails to provide a realistic picture of reading instruction inside Pakistan. According to Muhammad, researchers like Memon and Badger (2007) and Sultan (2007) point out some deficiencies. However, they fail to explore issues and challenges teachers face at a deeper level while teaching reading (Muhammad, 2012). Similarly, Muhammad's study ends by reporting vital statistics. For example, 70% of university teachers in Pakistan knew modern reading practices like intensive reading, yet only 30% could implement these during classroom instruction (Muhammad, 2012). However, the study does not attempt to explain or further explore the causes, factors, and effects at work behind these statistics.

Furthermore, some other researchers on reading instruction, like Ahmed and Rao (2013), also focus on reporting figures on reading instruction in terms of "what," "where," and "how many." However, they failed to communicate what teachers were doing while teaching reading. Thus, it was hoped that using a qualitative study, researchers would attain valuable insight into the "why" and "how" of intensive reading instruction, thereby bridging some of the above-discussed gaps in L2 reading research.

Setting and Participants

The research setting was a privately held university in the Gujranwala district of Punjab Province, Pakistan. The research population comprised teachers teaching English Composition, Reading, and Writing courses at the university level in the Gujranwala region. The research sample comprised three of those teachers. All three participants held an M.S/M.Phil. Degree in English Language & Literature. Two were male, and one was female, and all three are affiliated with the Department of English at the university where the research was conducted.

The sampling technique used was purposive sampling. Purpose sampling is a type of sampling in which only those specific elements from the population best suited to the purpose of the study are selected (Singh, 2016). Thus, the researcher purposefully chose three highly competent, knowledgeable, and experienced teachers, with teaching experience ranging from a minimum of five years to a maximum of 30 years. It was hoped that, based on their extensive teaching experiences and personal competence, the participants would give responses that would enable the researchers to gain valuable insights on the topic of intensive reading and related problems.

Data Collection Tools

Data was collected from the participants through semi-structured interviews. Two significant sources were utilized to design interview questions. There were a total of fifteen questions. seven of these were main questions, and six were sub-questions. The main questions were designed to test the participants' knowledge and awareness of modern teaching methods in reading, like intensive reading. The sub-questions aimed to attain a deeper understanding of what teachers were doing, why they were doing it, and the hindrances and challenges they faced while teaching reading.

Interviews of the participants were conducted individually on university premises. The interviews lasted for about 25 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured – the participants were given the time and the freedom to respond to the interview questions as they saw appropriate. As the interview was semi-structured, the interviewer asked some follow-up questions not part of the original interview questions. The interviews were voice-recorded to ensure accuracy in the collection and analysis of data.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data was analyzed with the help of thematic analysis. Thematic analysis, one of the most popular methods of analyzing semi-structured interviews, seeks to analyze data with the help of identifying common patterns running through the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In order to conduct thematic analysis, firstly, audio recordings were transcribed. The second step involved assigning codes to the transcribed data. A code is a description of what participants say during the interview. Identifying code involves writing a short descriptive phrase when the researcher comes across a conversation he/she finds interesting or insightful (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Raw data was sifted in this manner, and a list of 38 codes was developed. Next, the codes were grouped into themes. Themes are broader descriptive categories that include a group of codes. As codes were categorized under themes, redundant codes had to be discarded (see Appendix C for a list of codes and emerging themes). Themes were given names and descriptions. Finally, with the help of themes, a detailed report communicating results and findings was written.

Results and Discussion

Traces of Traditional Instructional Methods

The findings reveal that most teachers partially applied the intensive reading approach at the university level to teach reading. However, the participants' responses also revealed that some aspects of traditional teaching methods, like GTM, remained part of the reading sessions. These findings correlated with the findings of Ahmed & Rao (2003) and Coleman (2015) discussed in the Literature Review section. Both researchers asserted that traditional methods like Grammar Translation Methods have been used for many decades for teaching English reading and writing in Pakistan, and their presence can still be seen inside the classroom at all levels.

The researchers found much evidence of the traditional method used while conversing with the participants. For instance, one prominent feature of the intensive reading approach requires that students be given time to read on their own, silently. This is done so that they get an opportunity to fully engage with the text and internalize the structures of the language (Swan, 2011). However, one participant reported that he often asked students to read aloud; sometimes, he read the text himself for students – an activity more characteristic of GTM. He said:

“I do ask the brilliant students to read the passage out loud.... The brilliant students are appreciated by clapping. I do read by myself as well.” (Participant 3)

Similarly, it was found that reading sessions were primarily focused on teaching grammar and vocabulary – another characteristic feature of the GTM. Other features that form a crucial part of the intensive reading approach, such as text and discourse structures (transitional phrases, linking verbs,

topic sentences, thesis statements, main ideas, supporting ideas) and reading strategies (pre-reading, skimming, scanning, and skipping) were being left out. Thus, the participants said:

“As per my understating, it [text and discourse structures and reading strategies] should be taught separately.” (Participant 3)

Like Participant 2, Participant 3 also believed that these structures and strategies could only be taught to students majoring/specializing in English rather than all students learning English.

“Teachers in English can guide students about items like this is the topic sentence, these are cohesive devices etc. What about teachers from other departments? It is hard for them to go into those details.” (Participant 1)

Thus, from the above discussion, it is evident that even in the presence of modern approaches like intensive reading, teachers shifted to traditional methods from time to time.

A Comparison of Public vs Private Instructional Setting

This theme highlighted a significant difference between public and private university settings. Findings revealed that in public instructional settings at university level, teachers possessed sufficient know-how of intensive reading but did not implement it in practice. Contrarily, in a private university setting, intensive reading was present in practice, but a lack of knowledge of its theory could be seen. The researchers identified this theme by examining the participants’ conversations and revisiting some conclusions by Muhammad (2012), which are included in the Literature Review section.

As discussed above, Muhammad (2012) reports that when 71 English university teachers from government universities were surveyed, the majority displayed sufficient knowledge of the theory behind intensive reading – its goals, benefits, and implications. However, when it came to practice, most teachers in the government setting still used traditional methods inside the classroom (Muhammad, 2012). Contrary to that, after analyzing the interview responses, the researcher observed that almost all the participants in the private university setting were at least partially using the intensive reading approach in practice. (Theme 1 presents a detailed account of how the participants were making practical implementation of intensive reading). However, many weak areas could be seen when the participants were tested in terms of knowledge and theory surrounding intensive reading.

Differences in Students’ Academic Backgrounds– A Key Challenge

Uncovering challenges teachers face while teaching reading was one of the main goals of this research. An in-depth data analysis revealed that one of the biggest challenges the teachers faced was being mindful of students’ needs. This topic was brought up by the participants repeatedly throughout the interview. The teacher reported that students in English classrooms came from various educational backgrounds. Thus, before implementing any aspect of the intensive reading approach, they had to consider this difference in background and make decisions accordingly.

The researchers gained a better understating of the issue mentioned above by revisiting a section in the Literature Review chapter that outlined some significant challenges the Pakistani educational system struggles with. As discussed earlier, English is the medium of instruction in Pakistani private schools. However, the medium of instruction in government schools is Urdu, and English has been taught as a compulsory subject since year 1 (Coleman, 2015). Thus, students entering universities in Pakistan, have varying levels of competence in the English language, ranging from poor, average, and good to fully proficient. This difference in academic background and proficiency levels poses a significant problem during teaching for teachers.

Keeping the above in view, one participant reported that the first challenge facing him at the start of each semester was determining the students’ needs as communicated by the differences in their backgrounds. He said:

“Yes. When we teach English at the university level what I do for my students is have their plain introduction, in the first lecture, where they have come from. A small percentage has come from good English medium schools. The remaining 70 to 80 percent comes from private schools, so-called English schools. Their reaching and learning have been average to below average. In the first lecture, I need to understand what is students’ strength and weakness are. Then I plan my lesson according keeping in mind the needs and requirements of student.” (Participant 3)

Other Challenges

The participants also shared some other challenges and problems that prevented the successful implementation of intensive reading inside the classroom. Firstly, large class sizes were deemed a significant problem. All the participants agreed that, in Pakistan university settings, class size is poised as a significant obstacle to effective teaching. The participants stressed that the issue needed to be dealt with as soon as possible.

“Class size, it is humanly impossible to manage a class of more than 40 students. There are always students who completely lose track of things.” (Participant 1)

Secondly, time constraint was also regarded as a significant issue. The participants thought that time available for both a single lecture as well as for the complete Composition courses was inadequate. Participants believed that the time allotted to teach reading and the other three language components at university level was far less than what the Pakistani educational scenario demanded.

“It gets tough... Initially, they have to be marked for the roll call. Then you start, you do some brain storming. After you come to the main lesson, you finish that, you have to move to exercises... Time is always a challenge. There is so much to do.” (Participant 3)

Thirdly, during their interviews, participants also touched upon issues of student engagement and student willingness in ESL classrooms. These two factors were also deemed a hindrance to the successful implementation of intensive reading. One participant reported:

“In my average classes, there are 4 5 students who participate in everything. They are outspoken. However, there are always 10 to 15 students who do not want to answer...”

[Students] are not motivated. So you have to give such students extra attention. You have to make sure everyone is on the same page.” (Participant 1)

Fourth, participants also complained about the unavailability of good textbooks for teaching reading. In this regard, they demanded that a textbook be made available that touched upon all essential aspects of intensive reading and could serve as a guide for students and teachers. Also, one participant emphasized that textbooks be designed to match the particular career line chosen by the students. He was of the view that this could lead to students becoming better readers. Similarly, one participant suggested that the content of the textbooks be made more culturally relevant, which could lead to improvement in students' reading situations.

Conclusion

Scrutiny of primary and secondary data to uncover teacher-related problems also revealed that the above-discussed findings slightly contrast with past literature on the topic, such as the work of Mohammad (2012). Mohammad (2012) reported that most teachers displayed sufficient understanding of modern approaches like intensive reading (Mohammad, 2012). The reason for this variation in the results of the two types of research lies outside the scope of this study; it is an area that requires further testing. However, researchers predict that it may reflect educational and contextual variations existing between public vs. private university settings in Pakistan.

The above discussion on the teacher-related aspect of the intensive reading problem suggests essential implications and new avenues for further research. It is apparent that in private university settings, teachers are willing, enthusiastic, and committed to implementing modern approaches to reading. However, they need support and guidance. Researchers suggest that the commitment of teachers teaching in private university settings in Pakistan can be utilized more effectively with the help of training programs. Such programs can equip them with up-to-date knowledge of modern approaches, guide them on how to implement them practically and instruct them on how to avoid reverting to obsolete methods like GTM. To future researchers looking to delve into the topic of reading in Pakistani, it is suggested that research be directed toward identifying differences in public vs. private university settings. Also, it is suggested that, besides using surveys and interviews, data collection techniques include in-class observations.

Looking at student-related problems that hinder intensive reading, one key challenge the researchers identified during data analysis is the difference in students' pre-university academic backgrounds. This point was discussed in detail by all three participants. Students attending an ESL class in a Pakistani university setting possess varying academic and linguistic competence levels. Due to huge gaps between students' pre-university academic backgrounds, incorporating all the components of an approach like intensive reading in ESL classrooms is a never-ending struggle for teachers. Participants elaborated these assertions with real-life examples: they reported that if they gave time to one component of the intensive reading approach, e.g., silent reading, no time was left for another component, e.g., discussion of exercises (due to students' incompetence). If they discussed exercises in class, they had to forego another component of the intensive reading approach, e.g., giving students time to solve exercises.

The above findings build upon those arrived upon by Coleman (2015). By reporting key facts and figures about schools and school-going students, Coleman (2015) highlighted the disparity that is, unfortunately, a characteristic feature of the Pakistani education system. Data reported in this research provides a real-world reflection of how far-reaching the detrimental consequences of the disparity reported by Coleman (2015) can be. At the university level, this disparity in students' academic backgrounds becomes a significant hurdle that not only inhibits the learning of all university-level ESL students –and not just the ones possessing poor academic backgrounds – but also teachers' performance.

The study's findings suggest that the participants lacked precise knowledge of what intensive reading was and how or why intensive reading was essential to ESL/EFL learning contexts. Furthermore, findings revealed that a significant challenge facing private university teachers in teaching intensive reading was also a disparity in students' schooling backgrounds. This issue is reflective of the problematic roots on which Pakistan's entire education system stands. In light of the above findings, one essential suggestion from the researchers is that educators, administrators, and policymakers adopt a multi-dimensional view while looking at intensive reading and related issues. Research and research-backed solutions that cater to various stakeholders, i.e., students, teachers, and administrators, need to be undertaken. Addressing the topic of intensive reading with such a multidimensional approach can eradicate challenges hindering intensive reading and ensure its full implementation in Pakistani classrooms.

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