

English Reading Difficulties and Strategies for Improvement at Primary Level: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

English is an alien language. The teachers and students are facing difficulties in reading competency regarding, comprehension, speed, shyness, stuttering and stammering, jerks, fluency, pronunciation, accent intonation, and stress. The purpose of the study is to explore the difficulties in English reading competency and to develop strategies for the improvement of reading competency at the primary level. The key objectives of the study were to explore the difficulties in reading competency and to develop strategies for the improvement of reading competency of 5th-grade students at the primary level. These research questions were framed. What are the difficulties in reading competency faced by 5th-grade students? What strategies are needed to develop the reading competency of 5th-grade students? The study was qualitative and phenomenological in nature. The study was carried out through interviews with primary-level teachers and 5th-grade students. The sample was 12 participants, 6 were teachers and 6 were 5th-grade students. The analysis of the gathered data was made with the thematic analysis of Clarke and Braun (2019). Major findings were that students' lack of interest, mal-recruitment of engineers, MBA degree holders and lack of relevant educational background, adhocism, contract appointment and hiring teachers' trend, poor and uneducated parents and incompetency of teachers in the subject of English were the key difficulties in reading competency. These strategies were recommended. The teachers may be recruited who have Master's degrees in English with educational qualifications like B.Ed., M.Ed., MPhil, and Ph.D. in English or education. It was recommended that English Language teachers must provide basic reading skills to students to equip themselves with reading strategies for improvement in reading skills. It is also suggested that teachers may be given refresher programs through English experts for the improvement of reading competency.

Keywords: English, Reading competency, 5th Grade Learners, Primary Level, Phenomenology

Introduction

Language is the foundation of communication. It reflects the state of mind, acknowledged insight, understanding, and longings of the entire mankind. It is a distinguishing characteristic of Adam's sons and Eve's daughters, among all the living beings of the Creator of the Universe. Language has diverse facets and all these facets are significant. Reading is one of the facets of language which has a dominant position and delivers the foundation for the development of language skills in children. It is therefore indispensable, to prepare the upcoming generation with reading competency (Akmal, Dhivah, & Mulia, 2020).

At the primary level learners are delivered very rudimentary language in the shape of phonemes, phonetics, phonics, word identifications, morphology, sentence construction, and reading comprehension. All these facets of reading are desired to be taught at the primary level. Investigators showed agreement that the age of primary school children of 5th-grade students is the most significant in the kid's life as a kid can learn more words and expertise in operational communication at this age (Alwi, Samson, & Shahzadi, 2019).

A phoneme is the sound of letters and the smallest unique group of phones (articulate sound of vowels and consonants) in a language. Kids' competence in phonemes delivers the basis for phonetics. Phonetics signifies sounds employing discriminate letters for each sound. Phonemes and

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phonetics are narrowly associated in terms of sound. As for as phonics is concerned, it is associated with vocal sounds, while phonics is the approach of instructing kids to read by associating words with their phonetic values (Channa et al., 2015).

Word recognition is the identification of words in terms of their pronunciation and meaning understanding. It is obligated to phonemes, phonetics, and phonics. Further, it leads to the formation of a word, for which different methods are followed at different situations and levels. In other words, it is called morphology -it is the science of all forms of words as well as grammar (Haidar, & Fang, 2019).

Word formation is the base for sentence construction. It is a linear method in the instruction and learning of the English language. Sentence construction (syntax) is the part of grammar that deals with the thoughtful grouping of words, which is the base of reading comprehension. In reading comprehension, we have to depend entirely on the sense conveyed by the words in the text (Iqbal et al., 2015).

Reading comprehension is the understanding of a text or a part of the text. It is the construction, modification, and questioning of the materials in a unified method. Reading comprehension broadens the conceptual prospect of students. It disseminates the learner with fresh words and concepts that not only improve their vocabulary but enhance the learners' interest in reading. It also develops students' understanding of power. Apart from that, it assists individuals to assimilate their prior knowledge with the new concept and to form a new view of knowledge (Kilpatrick, 2015).

English is an important subject in our primary schools' curriculum, which ponder on the language development ability of students and is very crucial for the understanding of different subject material such as sciences and social studies. The role of an English teacher is very significant. He/she is the gateway for the increase of learners' knowledge of the English language. His competency in teaching the English language is crucial in preparing him/her for his due role which is teaching English. Consequently, it is authoritative that he should have a thorough command of the English language. He should possess high-quality English pronunciation, a rich vocabulary, and knowledge of reading strategies. He must have the basic knowledge of Educational Psychology, instruction of reading strategies, teaching methodologies, and teaching models. He must keep bound with up-to-date developments (research studies) in the teaching of the English language (Lovett et al., 2021). In a nutshell, it is said that highly qualified teachers, having sound knowledge of the English language, suitable application of teaching methodologies, and sound preparation for class teaching strongly affect students' learning of reading proficiency.

Reading is one of the most necessary skills for learning the English language. Reading is the competency of an individual to understand and connect with the written text. Through reading, a reader can experience the events in the past and fly into the future. With the help of reading one can visit the minds of others. On the more practical side reading is one of the most important things in educational institutions. It is also very necessary for jobs because the better we make the reading proficiency, the better we attain the career (Melesse, & Enyew, 2020).

Reading abilities and talents involve greater devotion and offered a base for other skills. It is the first requirement for other skills. It developed ethics and sharpened the intelligence of students. It helps the student with spelling corrections and improves their fluency. It serves as a springboard for the progress of integrated language skills and for improving cognitive and affective domains which enable the students to think critically and creatively. Reading is the art that is learned through practice. Careful and constant reading rises the knowledge and the thinking capacity of the learners (Fesi, & Mncube, 2021; Sajid, & Siddiqui, 2015).

Statement of the Problem

The study explores a study on the difficulties and improvement of reading competency at the primary level. It will further target different aspects of students reading difficulties in students' reading and may identify the strategies for the improvement of reading competency

Objectives

- 1) To explore the difficulties in reading competency faced by primary students of 5th grade
- 2) To develop strategies for the improvement of reading competency of 5th-grade students at the primary level

Research Questions

1. What are the difficulties in reading competency for 5th-grade students?
2. What are the strategies for improvement in reading competency of 5th-grade students at the primary level?

Significance of the Study

The study may improve teachers' and students' knowledge, skills, and competence in the teaching of reading. It may provide insight to curriculum experts in constructing curriculum for the primary level in particular and secondary level in general. It is also significant for teachers and learners to identify difficulties in reading and strategies to improve reading competency.

Delimitation of the study

The study was delimited only to;

- Primary Schools of District Mardan.
- Female students of 5th grade.
- It was further delimited to the urban area of District Mardan.

Literature Review

Abbas et al. (2020) posit that reading is related to the total progress of youngsters. Reading makes strong learners mentally, psychologically, and socially. Reading upsurges the command of intelligence in alphabet learning refines the power of understanding, develops knowledge of words, and augments the writing skill.

Akmal et al. (2020) contend that it is very difficult to judge reading capability precisely. The reading ability of learners in the communicative competence model is that they can use reading to attain the purposes and aims of communication. Appraisal and assessment of the skill of reading want to be interconnected with drives for reading.

Farooq et al. (2020) theorize that reading comprehension and word recognition are the basic components of reading competence. Bojovic (2010) speculates that reading is an intellectual aptitude that a kid can use when he/she is intermingling with a book or written stuff. The necessities of reading skills are the knowing words meaning and techniques of the author, identifying the text style, probing solutions to the questions, recognizing the draft of the language, deducing meaning from the used words either contextual, referential, or conceptual, getting explicit or hidden meaning, understanding the communicative worth of sentences and reading comprehension of passages through skimming and scanning techniques. It is deduced from the study that the rate of occurrence of analyzing and use of applied rigorous teaching and training advances kids' reading competency.

Shakil (2020) suggests that diverse dimensions of reading can improve the reading capabilities of students. These dimensions are *reading comprehension*- understanding the paragraph; *phonology*- the skill of the student that follows rules which deal with the formation and sequence of speech sounds, which can be developed with the help of experts; *semantics*-deals with vocabulary and underlining the thoughts which are communicated in words and words groupings. When children first use the word, it often does not mean a similar thing as it does to grownups. To build a multipurpose vocabulary, the kids must polish the meanings of hundreds of words and associate them into an elaborate network of connected terms; *grammar*- Syntax, the mish-mash of sentence structure, language rules, word order, and morphology- use of grammatical markers indicating tenses, voices, cases, gender, number, and the other meanings; *Pragmatics*- the application of rules in a suitable and operational communication. It encompasses sociolinguistic knowledge. All these facets enable each other through their close connection.

Research Methods

The study was qualitative-phenomenological. It explored the difficulties of reading competency and suggested ways of improving reading competency. Through interviews, data were collected from six teachers and six 5th-grade students. Teachers' and students' views were analyzed through the thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2019).

Population

The population of the study was primary school teachers and students of District Mardan. All Government Primary Schools and students of the 5th class constituted the population of the study.

- All Government Primary Schools of district Mardan constituted the population of the study.
- All female Primary school teachers of District Mardan constituted the population of the study.
- All 5th-class students of GGPS of district Mardan constituted the population of the study.

Sample and sampling procedure

The researcher used Probability purposive sampling techniques for the selection of government female schools, teachers, and students. The sample of the study was six female primary school teachers and six 5th-grade female students of District Mardan.

Data Collection Instrument

The interview protocol was developed based on difficulties of reading competency and strategies for improvement. It was used for the collection of data from female Teachers and Students. Interviews were conducted with those teachers who were teaching English to 5th-grade students

Data Analysis

Thematic Analysis

Interviews were used to gather data from the teachers and students. The gathered data were then analyzed via thematic analysis techniques as approved by Clarke and Braun (2019). Both researchers presented six stages to analyze the gathered data thematically. Clarke and Braun (2019) followed and details were presented below;

Step 1. Familiarity with Data by Transcribing from the Audio Recording:

Twelve female teachers and 5th-grade students were interviewed from government primary schools. But at the 10th interview, data was saturated, and finished at the 12th interview. Interviews were recorded, listened attentively noted the important and relevant materials, and transcribed. Concourse building was in progress and more than a hundred pertinent declarations were transliterated as; *Kids who have attractive, colorful, interesting, well-written books in the primary grades, they have the strong reading capability; kids always practice on alphabetic principle to improve reading competency; Several kids arrive at 5th grade not quite sure what reading is for; they can improve reading competency on 'kill and drill' approach; teachers must motivate students for reading; I feel shyness reading before others. Charts may be placed in classrooms for the improvement of reading skills so that the children can read themselves. Vocabulary practice in classrooms to focus on improving reading skills. Teachers may support reading development while teaching the details of letters and sounds. Children require clear training in the mapping of letters to sounds– 'phonics training. Primary teaching must assimilate training about letters and sounds with reading for meaning, reading words, and reading texts of interest. Children may be provided with literacy environments for poor students who uneducated parents; successful initial reading instruction resulting in rapid and accurate word reading; good oral language skills, large oral vocabularies, good listening comprehension; well-developed stores of world knowledge in a variety of subject areas; social interactions in homes, classrooms, and the community that motivate students to read; opportunities to practice reading for various purposes; lots of exposure to many different kinds of reading materials; various specific instructional practices that have proven to be particularly effective in improving reading comprehension; I see the major difficulties in reading are the shyness, lifeless reading, stuttering and stammering, reading with jerks and too fast or too slow reading; improvement is made with reading good books; Careful and constant reading of Synonyms (sweat, perspiration), Homonyms (right, right), Homophones (accept, except) Antonyms (perfidy, faithfulness) is very necessary to improve reading competency; The proper use of punctuation helps the reader to understand the meaning more easily, by indicating the relation between words, phrases, clauses and sentences, if he is reading the passage aloud; It is essential to sensitize the students to the fact that good reading does not mean reading aloud or learning all the new words in the reading text and answering all the comprehension questions. Better readers are the ones who are equipped with the skills of purposeful reading; correct spelling is the very soul of good reading. English spelling is very irregular. Some spelling is the same but pronunciation is different as GREAT and CHEAT, PUT and BUT, etc. At other times, the sound is the same but the spelling is different as in WRITE and RIGHT, VEIN and VANE, etc. The silent letters come sometimes, in the beginning, a middle or final position as in PSYCHOLOGY, CALM, and TOMB; Vocabulary is one of five core components of reading teaching that are indispensable to successfully teach kids how to read. These core components comprise phonemic awareness, phonics, and word study, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension; students' reading can be developed and improved by grammar, taught in the context of reading. Reading can be improved by giving good examples and sound preparation; Reading is an art and is learned by practice. It is the most important aspect of language learning and particularly in English learning. Repetition of reading passages plays a significant role in the development of reading skills.*

For accuracy and fluency, the teacher should possess an adequate vocabulary, a reasonable command of English idioms, sound pronunciation, and intonation, an accent, correct spelling, and a proper sense of sentence structure. The ability to understand English by reading needs proper training and regular practice; Teachers should provide lectures of good readers through tape recorders, radio talks, and multimedia to the students for the enhancement of their knowledge and competency. Reading is one of the best means of making the mind full; It is relatively not easy to learn about phonemes if a letter can be pronounced in various ways (e.g. the letter "A" in English sets down onto a dissimilar phoneme in the exceptionally familiar words "cat", "was", "saw", "made", and car. A matched set of items of simple real-words ("ball", "boy") and non-words ("deem", "fop"; decoding is a difficulty; the dearth of focus in reading; learning disability is a problem in reading; lack of phonemic and phonological awareness are difficulties in reading; slow reading, poor comprehension.

Step 2. Collating data with initial codes

Collated Statements	
001RD	<i>Those students who have a lack of phonemic and phonological awareness face difficulties in reading; slow reading and poor comprehension are the key difficulties; learning disability is a difficulty in reading; decoding is a difficulty in reading; the dearth of focus is a difficulty in reading; incorrect pronunciation is a difficulty in reading; shyness, lifeless reading, stuttering and stammering, reading with jerks and too fast or too slow reading are the difficulties of reading; and uneducated parents are major difficulty, and incompetent teachers are the main difficulties in reading.</i>
002SIRC	<i>The use of tape-recorders, radio talks and multimedia can improve students' reading; proper training and regular practice can enhance reading competency; adequate knowledge of words, a reasonable command of English idioms, a sound pronunciation, intonation, accent, correct spelling and a proper sense of sentence structure improves reading capability; repetition of reading passages progresses reading competence; strong vocabulary can increase reading expertise; correct spelling can develop the skill of good reading; purposeful reading can upsurge reading skill; the proper use of punctuation helps in improving reading competency; Careful and constant reading of synonyms, homonyms, homophones, and antonyms (perfidy, faithfulness) is essential to improve reading competency; Charts may be placed in classrooms for improvement of reading skill; Vocabulary practice in classrooms to focus on improving reading skill; competent teachers can improve reading skill of students; and teachers' motivation improves reading competency of learners.</i>

Step 3. Searching for themes (Emerged themes and sub-themes)

001RD: Phonemic and phonological awareness, slow reading and poor comprehension, learning disability, decoding, dearth of focus, incorrect pronunciation, shyness, purposeless reading, stuttering, and stammering, reading with jerks, too fast or too slow reading, uneducated parents, and incompetent teachers.

002SIRC: Tape-recorders, multimedia, proper training, regular practice, adequate knowledge of words, sound pronunciation, intonation, accent, correct spelling, a proper sense of sentence structure; repetition of reading passages, strong vocabulary, teachers' reading expertise, purposeful reading, the proper use of punctuation, careful and constant reading of synonyms, homonyms, homophones, and antonyms; charts in classroom, vocabulary practice in classrooms, competent teachers, and teachers' motivation.

Step 4. Reviewing themes

Figure 1 Thematic mapping of difficulties of reading competency Word Trees

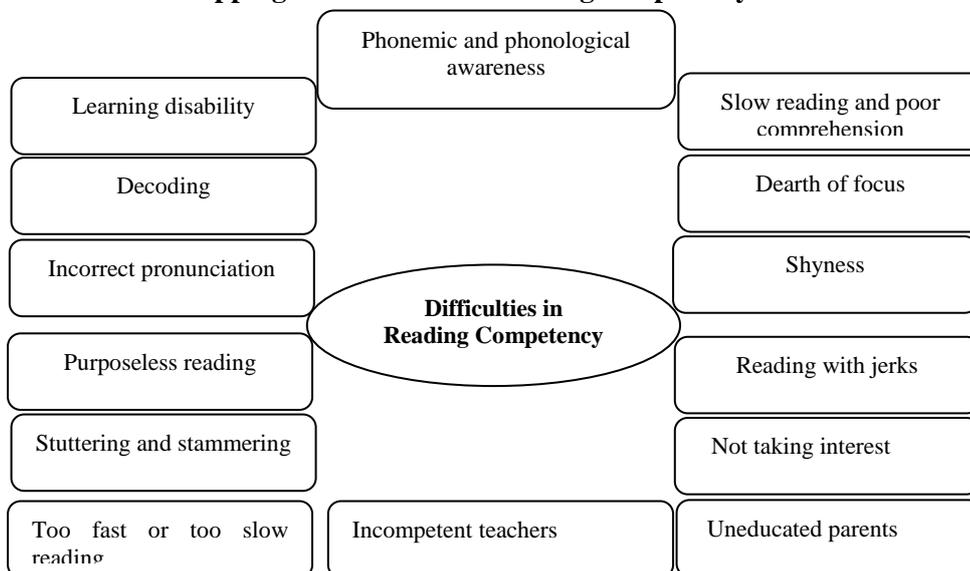
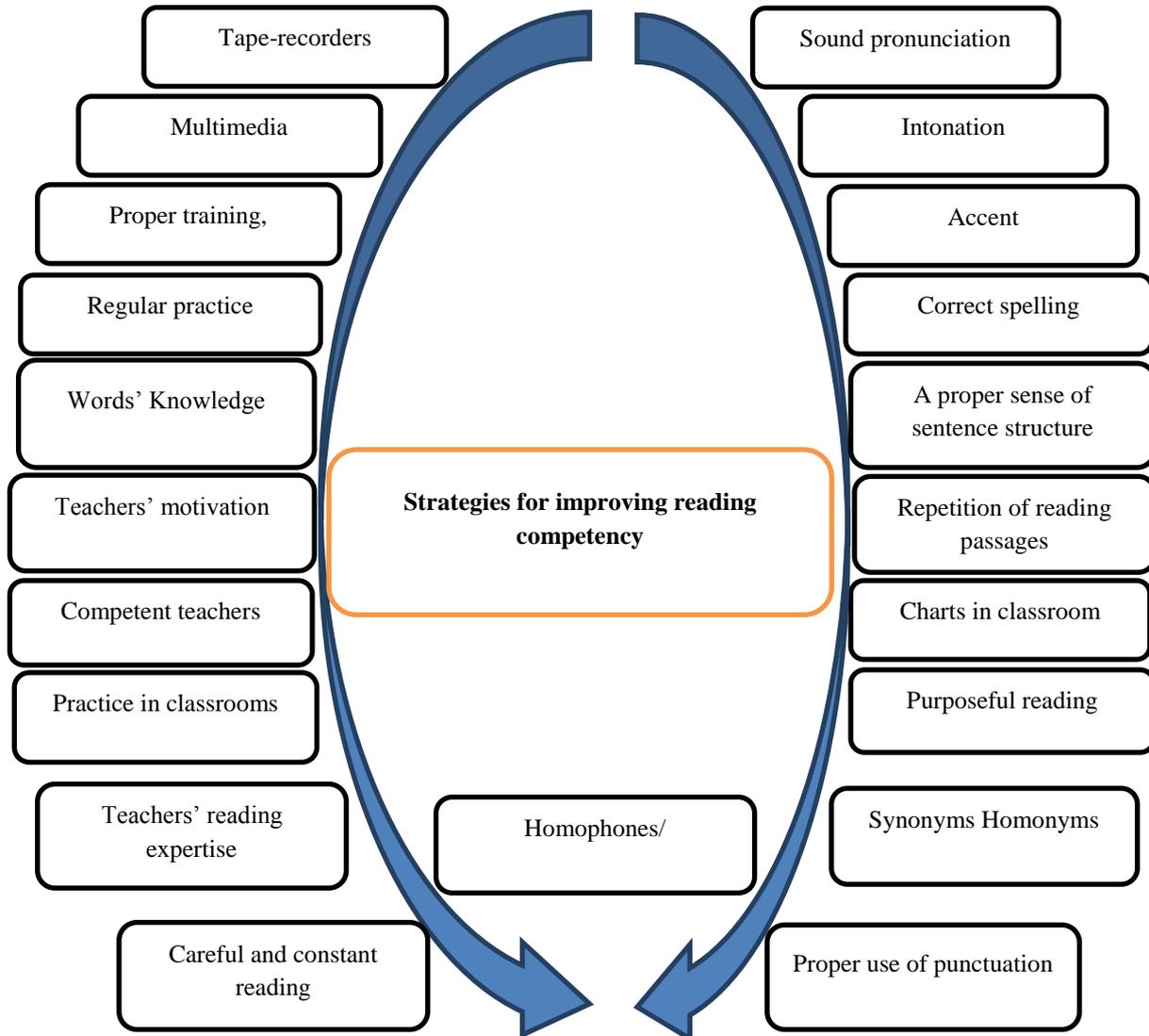


Figure 2 Thematic mapping of Strategies for Improving Reading competency Word Trees



Step 5. Defining and naming themes

1. Lack of phonemic and phonological awareness are difficulties in reading. Similarly, slow reading and poor comprehension are the key difficulties. Likewise learning disability is difficulty in reading. Decoding is another difficulty in reading. The dearth of concentration and deep focus in reading is a difficulty. Incorrect pronunciation is one of the difficulties in reading. Correspondingly shyness, insensible reading, stumbling and stuttering, reading with jerks, and too fast or too slow reading are the difficulties of reading. Uneducated parent has major difficulty in reading skill and incompetent teachers are the main difficulties in reading competencies. All these statements reflect **difficulties in the reading competency** of the teachers and students
2. Tape recorders and multimedia in the classroom are the best strategies for enhancing reading capability. Proper training, regular practice, adequate knowledge of words, sound pronunciation, intonation, accent, correct spelling, and a proper sense of sentence structure are the best strategies for improving reading skills. Repetition of reading passages, strong vocabulary, teachers' reading expertise, purposeful reading, the proper use of punctuation, careful and constant reading of synonyms, homonyms, homophones, and antonyms; charts in classroom, vocabulary practice in classrooms, competent teachers, and teachers' motivation are the best **Strategies for improving reading competency** as reflected from these keywords and statements.

Step 6. Producing report/interpretation

These themes emerged from the qualitative data. Difficulties in reading competency. Lack of phonemic and phonological awareness are difficulties in reading (*Student 5*). Similarly, slow reading and poor comprehension are the key difficulties in reading capability (*Student 3*). Likewise learning disability is difficulty in reading expertise (*Teacher 2*). Decoding is another difficulty in reading (*Student 2*). Scarcity of concentration and deep focus in reading is a difficulty (*Student 6*). Incorrect pronunciation is one of the difficulties in reading (*Student 1*). No practice in the classroom on drill method is a problem in reading (*Teacher 3*). Correspondingly shyness, insensible reading, stumbling and stuttering, reading with jerks, and too fast or too slow reading are the difficulties of reading (*Teacher 4*). The uneducated parent is a major difficulty in reading skills (*Teacher 5*). Incompetent teachers are the main difficulties in reading competencies (*Teacher 1*). Lack of motivation on the part of the teacher is a great problem (*Student 4*). *There are no workshops or refresher courses on reading in the school except Pakistan Reading Project. It is a great issue* (*Teacher 6*). Tape recorders and multimedia in the classroom are the best strategies for enhancing reading capability (*student 4*). Proper training for teachers on reading is the crying need of the time and it is a good strategy for improving reading competency (*student 4*). Regular practice in the class by students is an effective strategy (*student 2*). Adequate knowledge of words and their exercise in the class in the presence of a teacher is an efficient strategy to enhance reading competency (*student 5*). Sound pronunciation, intonation, and accent on the part of a teacher in the classroom teaching is a great strategy (*student 1*). A proper sense of sentence structure and practice are the best strategies for improving reading skills (*student 3*). Repetition of reading passages is a strategy (*Teacher 5*). Strong vocabulary and its meaning during reading is a good strategy (*Teacher 3*). Teachers' reading expertise is the flashing point of the hour (*Teacher 1*). Purposeful reading is a strategy for enhancing reading competency (*Student 1*). The proper use of punctuation and careful and constant reading of synonyms, homonyms, homophones, and antonyms are effective strategies for developing reading competency (*students 2, 5 & 6; Teacher 4*). Charts in the classroom, vocabulary practice in classrooms, competent teachers, and teachers' motivation are the best remedies for increasing reading capability (*students 3, 4 & 6; Teacher 3, 5 & 6*).

Findings and conclusions

It was found that Phonemic and phonological awareness, slow reading and poor comprehension, learning disability, decoding, dearth of focus, incorrect pronunciation, shyness, purposeless reading, stuttering, and stammering, reading with jerks, too fast or too slow reading, uneducated parents, and incompetent teachers are the major hurdles in reading competency. It was noted that Tape-recorders and multimedia in the classroom. proper training to students in reading drills, regular practice in reading on daily basis, adequate knowledge of words both with teacher and students, sound pronunciation, intonation, accent, correct spelling capabilities of the teacher as well as students, a proper sense of sentence structure both with teacher and students, repetition of reading passages by students, the strong vocabulary of both teacher and students, teachers' reading expertise, purposeful reading for both teacher and students, the proper use of punctuation, careful and constant reading of synonyms, homonyms, homophones, and antonyms both for teacher and students, charts in classroom, vocabulary practice in classrooms, competent teachers, and teachers' motivation are the fundamental strategies for the improvement of reading competency.

It was concluded that numerous hurdles are existing to hamper the learning of reading skills and then improving the competency of reading. The primary school female teachers and students presented their views about the difficulties in reading competency and then suggested ways and strategies for the improvement and enhancement of reading competency. According to their knowledge and capability, they highlighted that reading is an activity that is improved through continuous practice. Despite the fact, those difficulties in the way of reading competency are countless, for improvement in reading competency, strategies are also in effect.

Recommendations

I conducted a study on reading skills. Therefore, it is suggested that future researchers may conduct their studies on other skills like writing, speaking, etc. I conducted a study on reading difficulties and strategies for improvement at the primary level. Therefore, the upcoming researchers are suggested to conduct the same studies at other levels like secondary, college, or university levels.

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