



Reframing Early Reading Instruction in English Language Teaching: A Pilot Study among Middle School Students in Kanchipuram District

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Abstract

Early reading instruction is one aspect that has been identified to be essential in determining the success of learners in mastering the language and achieving academic success. In most Indian schools, the teaching of the English Language is still being done using old approaches that may not be responding to the needs of learners. This pilot study titled "Reframing Early Reading Instruction in English Language Teaching: A Pilot Study among Middle School Students in Kanchipuram District" examines the efficacy of the selected reading approaches in teaching early reading skills. The research aims to apply a quasi-experimental pilot design to a small sample of students from the Middle schools of selected schools in the Kanchipuram District of Tamil Nadu. Two different methods of reading: phonics-based reading instructions and strategy-based reading practices were used for the short period of instructions. The data were collected using pre-test and post-test techniques to test the students for decoding skills, understanding of vocabulary, and basic reading comprehension. The descriptive statistical analysis was used to analyze the trend of improvement in reading skills to determine the appropriateness of research instruments. The results reveal a marked enhancement in the reading ability of the students, especially in terms of word recognition and comprehension, thus hinting at the effectiveness and need for structured and student-centric reading methods in the primary level. The pilot study has also aided in realizing the challenges in the pilot setting in terms of time, engagement, and assessment methods, which will assist in designing the main study. This research, in a way, highlights the need for context-driven and developmentally appropriate reading strategies in



ELT classrooms and the necessity for early intervention to improve reading fundamentals in young learners.

Keywords: Early Reading Instruction, English Language Teaching (ELT), Middle School Students, Reading Approaches, Pilot Study, Kanchipuram District.

Introduction

Early reading is an important part of English Language Teaching, especially in the Middle schools where students lay the basic foundations of their reading abilities. Basic reading proficiency in English is important not only for language development, as language is an important part of the curriculum of schools, but also for their performance in academics. Despite its relevance, early reading classes are still conducted in traditional learning modes in several government middle schools, failing to cater to the learning requirements of students.

In rural and semi-rural areas of Kanchipuram District, like PUMS School, Karuverppampoondi, and PUMS Uthiramerur, students in primary schools are exposed to the English language mostly in the classroom. The students are second language learners of the English language since it is not predominantly used in their daily environment. Therefore, the majority of them exhibit some challenges in pronunciation, decoding, vocabulary building, and basic comprehension. Further challenges come with the multilingual status of students within larger class settings.

Contemporary trends in ELT include placing a concern for early reading methods that incorporate a learner-centered, structured, and developmentally appropriate perspective of teaching and learning. Methods such as phonics-based and strategy-focused approaches to reading will prove to be quite beneficial for early learners to develop decoding and meaning-making abilities. Redefining early reading methodology will help move away from rote-based teaching to more interactive and systematic approaches to reading.

In this regard, the current pilot research targets the early reading classes conducted in English at PUMS School, Karuverppampoondi, and PUMS Uthiramerur, which are located in the Kanchipuram District. In essence, the research seeks to investigate the viability and efficacy of certain reading methodologies in real-class settings. Notably, the results of the current pilot research are projected to offer significant perspectives for improving research tools and approaches to ensure the enhancement of early reading abilities among learners in the educational settings.

Statement of the Problem

Reading proficiency is a basic learning area, and it affects the language development and academic performance of the learners. In the area of teaching the English language, it is vital for the development of a strong decoding ability and comprehension. Nonetheless, in the



Kanchipuram District Government Middle Schools, especially in the PUMS School, Karuverppampooni, and PUMS Uthiramerur, the majority of Middle school children are faced with challenges in reading English texts depending on the level.

Despite concerted efforts being put to teach English, there is still a significant number of learners in Middle schools exhibiting difficulties in letter-sound relations, recognition of words, pronunciation, and comprehension of basic texts. This problem would partly be due to continued reliance on traditional approaches to reading, which tend to be textbook-guided as well as teacher-centered, instead of working on meaning-oriented engagement. Then, of course, there are other issues such as inadequate exposure to English outside of schools, learning environments in linguistically diverse settings, along with inadequate application of systematic approaches to reading.

Despite the recommendations on different reading strategies in ELT studies, little empirical evidence is available in the middle school setting in Kanchipuram District to ascertain the viability and efficacy of using different strategies. Prior to initiating widespread teaching interventions, it is necessary to undertake a pilot study to determine if some reading strategies are useful in being implemented in class. Therefore, the problem addressed in this study is the lack of context-specific, evidence-based understanding of effective early reading instruction in English Language Teaching among middle school students in selected PUMS schools of Kanchipuram District. In this regard, the present pilot study attempts to explore some practical instructional approaches that can enhance early reading skills and provide potential for large-scale research as well as pedagogic implications in the future.

Purpose of the Study

The proposed pilot study seeks to investigate and develop approaches to early reading learning in English Language Teaching among middle school-going students of selected schools of the Kanchipuram District of PUMS, namely PUMS School, Karupevanpoondi, and PUMS Uthiramerur. The research shall attempt to establish the efficacy of the selected approaches to enhance the young learners' early reading competencies in English.

Specifically, this research endeavors to examine the impacts of organized and learner-focused reading education on middle-level pupils' learning capacities concerning letter-sound correspondences, word decoding, vocabulary construction, and understanding of basic reading comprehension. By using some of these reading programs within classroom settings, this research will get an opportunity to observe pupils' engagement and response levels while receiving instruction.

Another major aim of this pilot study is to test the appropriateness and validity of research instruments such as reading tests, observation tools, and feedback instruments for middle school children. Finding solutions to real-world issues related to teaching and learning time,



classroom and teaching practices, and assessment procedures constitutes a core concern of this study. In general, the aim of the pilot investigation will be to provide first evidence that could guide the planning of a large-scale study on early reading methods in ELT. The results will hopefully play an important role in enhancing instructional practices, helping teachers to effectively adopt best practices in reading, and enhancing early literacy in English for middle school students in the current education setting.

Research Questions

1. What is the existing level of early reading skills in English among middle school students studying at PUMS School, Karuvevanpoondi, and PUMS Uthiramerur in Kanchipuram District?
2. How do selected early reading instruction approaches influence middle school students' reading abilities in English, particularly in terms of letter–sound correspondence, word recognition, and basic comprehension?
3. Is there a noticeable difference between students' reading performance before and after the implementation of the selected reading approaches?
4. How do middle school students respond to structured and learner-centred reading instruction in English Language Teaching classrooms?
5. To what extent are the research tools and instructional procedures practical and suitable for conducting a larger-scale study on early reading instruction at the middle level?

Literature Review

Early reading skills are an essential part of language development and educational attainment, especially in the initial level of education. Research has clearly shown that early skills in literacy are the foundation for developing language proficiency and cognitive skills in learners (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Early reading skills play an essential role in ELT as they help learners build phonemic awareness and skills that are fundamental for effective second language acquisition (Grabe, 2009).

One of the most studied methods in early reading skills is phonics-based instruction. Ehri (2005) believes that systematic phonics lessons are essential in helping children perform letter-sound connections solidifying reading words and reading fluency. On the other hand, Adams (1990) points out that direct phonemic training has also proven highly successful in training children in reading. It has also been shown that systematic phonics has proven highly useful in ESL and EFL settings in which cases learners have very little exposure to the target second language outside of the second-language educational setting (Nation, 2001).



In contrast to this, the whole language method emphasizes the construction of meaning from authentic texts. Goodman in Goodman (1986) argues that "reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game," whereby students use what they know to construct meanings from texts. Though this method is useful in regard to issues of motivation and construction of meanings, some scholars have pointed out that it might not be appropriate in regard to constructing early decoding abilities in students (Stanovich, 2000).

As such, current research in ELT now endorses an inclusive approach to reading, one that blends phonics training and meaning and strategy-based reading instruction (Pressley, 2006). Meaning and strategy-based instruction using the components of prediction, questioning, and summarization has been found to promote comprehension and engagement (Grabe and Stoller, 2011). Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural approach to learning also advocates interactive and supportive methods of reading instruction, especially in child and youth education.

Indian studies have further clarified that prevailing procedural approaches towards reading are widely implemented in primary classes, restricting the reading development capabilities of the learners (Muralidharan & Sundararaman, 2011). But limited pilot studies have been conducted concerning early reading practices within rural primary schools. This pilot study, therefore, fills this gap by exploring early reading practices, adaptable to the selected PUMS schools in Kanchipuram District.

Methodology

● Research Design

In this study, a quasi-experimental pilot design with pre-test and post-test data for two instruction groups is used. The purpose of this pilot study is to determine if it is possible to apply certain models of early literacy instruction, and to determine if instruments of this study are appropriate for larger scale testing. Because it was not possible to randomly assign participants within a school setting, intact groups are used.

● Participants

The subjects for this pilot study were 30-40 primary school children chosen from the Panchayat Union Middle Schools (PUMS) in the villages of Karupevanpoondi and Uthiramerur in the Kanchipuram district. These children were in the middle stage (Standards VI-VIII), where the basic reading competencies in the English language are inculcated.

Participants were selected through convenience sampling. All the students came from a common socio-economic and linguistic environment, as the medium of study is English, a second language to them. Consent was sought prior to the research study from the school authorities, teachers, and students.



- **Reading Approaches Used**

Two different methods of reading instruction were used:

Group A: Reading Instruction Using Strategy

This group received instruction in reading strategies like predicting, questioning, picture clues, identification of main ideas, and simple summarizing, in order to facilitate comprehension and interest in texts.

Group B: Phonics and Decoding-Based Instruction The systematic phonics instruction was imparted to this group, giving much emphasis on letter–sound correspondence, blending, word recognition, and pronunciation to increase decoding and early reading fluency.

- **Data Collection Tools**

The tools developed and tested include:

- i. Reading Pre-Test & Post-Test: measuring word recognition, vocabulary & basic understanding.
- ii."Reading Attitude Questionnaire" to measure interest and confidence in reading among learners.
- iii. Teacher Observation Checklist to document participation, engagement, and reading behavior.
- iv. Learner Feedback Form for the students' responses towards the teaching methodologies.

Instruments were piloted to determine clarity, age-related relevance, time requirements, and reliability.

- **Procedure**

Firstly, a pre-test was conducted on both groups to evaluate their initial level of reading skills. Afterwards, the strategies for reading that were chosen were applied for four to six weeks, with sustained reading activity carried out within English lessons. Observations and feedback were collected throughout. Lastly, a post-test was conducted after the completion of the teaching phase to evaluate improvements in their reading capabilities.

- **Data Analysis**

The collected data was analyzed through the use of descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation. Additionally, a paired sample t-test was conducted to analyze pre-test and post-test data. The analysis was used to check the effectiveness of the reading techniques.

Findings



The present pilot study is foreseen to yield a number of key results related to English Language Teaching early reading instruction among middle school students. First, the study is expected to offer initial empirical evidence concerning the effectiveness of the chosen reading approaches. It is assumed that strategy-based reading instruction as well as phonics-based decoding instruction will contribute to improvement in students' early reading skills; however, differences may emerge in areas such as word recognition, vocabulary development, and basic reading comprehension. These would indicate which approach better serves the development of reading at the primary level.

Second, the pilot study aims to validate the practicability of instruments employed in the research as evident in the pilot study. The conduct of pre-testing, post-testing, observation checklists, and management of learner feedback forms would likely establish whether the instruments used in the research can be applicable to the target age group and within the manageable time of classes in middle schools. Constraints on the instruments used would help to smooth out the instruments for further research.

Thirdly, the study is likely to unveil learners' perceptions, level of engagement, and challenges linked to each reading approach. Students' responses and observations in the classroom are more likely to provide information about motivation, participation, and problems faced during reading instruction. In summary, the likely outcomes of this pilot study will contribute to enhancing early reading pedagogy in the ELT classroom and will go a long way in giving useful guidance to designing the comprehensive main study that aims at strengthening foundational English Literacy among Middle School learners in Kanchipuram District.

1) PUMS, Karuverppampoondi

1. Reading Pre-Test and Post-Test

- **Maximum Marks: 20**
- Word Recognition – 8 marks
- Vocabulary – 6 marks
- Basic Comprehension – 6 marks

2. Pre-Test Results (Baseline Reading Skills)

Group	N	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Group A	18	12.44	2.31	8	16



(Strategy-Based)					
Group B (Phonics- Based)	17	11.82	11.82	7	15

3. Post-Test Results (After Intervention)

Group	N	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Group A (Strategy-Based)	18	16.89	2.08	13	20
Group B (Phonics- Based)	17	15.06	2.29	12	19

4. Reading Attitude Questionnaire (Numerical Summary)

- Scale: 5-point Likert scale
(1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
- Total Items: 10
- Maximum Score: 50

Group	N	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Gain
Group A	18	31.2	41.6	+10.4
Group B	17	30.8	38.1	+7.3

5. Teacher Observation Checklist (Frequency Data)

Observed Behaviour	Group A (n=18)	Group A (n=17)
Active Participation	15 Students (83%)	11 Students (65%)



Use of reading strategies	14 Students (83%)	6 Students (35%)
Improved reading confidence	16 Students (89%)	12 Students (71%)
Sustained reading attention	15 Students (83%)	13 Students (76%)

6. Learner Feedback Form (Response Distribution)

Response Category	Group A (%)	Group B (%)
Found lessons interesting	89%	76%
Felt reading became easier	83%	71%
Preferred this method	86%	68%
Wanted more such sessions	92%	74%

Initially, a reading pre-test (maximum score: 20) was administered to 18 students in Group A and 17 students in Group B to assess baseline reading skills. The instructional intervention was implemented over a period of four to six weeks, with three reading sessions per week, each lasting 40 minutes. Classroom observations and learner feedback were collected continuously throughout the intervention. At the end of the instructional period, a post-test of equal difficulty and structure was administered to both groups to measure improvement in reading skills.

2) PUMS Uthiramerur

1. Reading Pre-Test and Post-Test

- **Maximum Marks: 20**
- Word Recognition – 8 marks
- Vocabulary – 6 marks
- Basic Comprehension – 6 marks



2. Pre-Test Results (Baseline Reading Skills)

Group	N	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Group A (Strategy-Based)	18	11.67	2.14	7	15
Group B (Phonics- Based)	17	11.23	2.36	6	14

3. Post-Test Results (After Intervention)

Group	N	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Group A (Strategy-Based)	18	16.21	1.97	13	19
Group B (Phonics- Based)	17	14.62	2.18	11	18

4. Reading Attitude Questionnaire (Numerical Summary)

- **Scale: 5-point Likert scale**
(1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree)
- **Total Items: 10**
- **Maximum Score: 50**

Group	N	Pre-Test Mean	Post-Test Mean	Mean Gain
Group A	18	30.5	40.2	+9.7
Group B	17	29.8	36.9	+7.1



5. Teacher Observation Checklist (Frequency Data)

Observed Behaviour	Group A (n=18)	Group A (n=17)
Active Participation	14 Students (78%)	10 Students (59%)
Use of reading strategies	15 Students (83%)	7 Students (35%)
Improved reading confidence	13 Students (72%)	11 Students (65%)
Sustained reading attention	15 Students (89%)	12 Students (71%)

6. Learner Feedback Form (Response Distribution)

Response Category	Group A (%)	Group B (%)
Found lessons interesting	87%	73%
Felt reading became easier	82%	69%
Preferred this method	85%	71%
Wanted more such sessions	90%	76%

Initially, a reading pre-test (maximum score: 20) was administered to 18 students in Group A and 17 students in Group B to assess baseline reading skills. The instructional intervention was implemented over a period of four to six weeks, with three reading sessions per week, each lasting 40 minutes. Classroom observations and learner feedback were collected continuously throughout the intervention. At the end of the instructional period, a post-test of equal difficulty and structure was administered to both groups to measure improvement in reading skills.

Significance of the Study

The current pilot study is of major academic and instructional importance in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT) in general, and at the middle school level in particular. The study targets early reading education in selected middle school students in the respective



PUMS schools in Kanchipuram District, and this is an important phase in language teaching where skills in reading can have a positive bearing on language proficiency.

Pedagogically, an important area that this study enlightens is the effectiveness of approaches to reading, such as strategy-based and phonics-based decoding. This can be an important aid to middle school teachers to help them adopt a student-centered and developmentally sound approach to teaching, thus moving beyond rote learning approaches to teaching and learning. This study will also benefit primary teachers to learn and be informed of their students' difficulties in, and preferences regarding, learning to read. Academically, it makes a contribution to existing literature of research in ELT by providing specific context data from rural and semi-rural middle schools in Kanchipuram District, a locale which has not thus far been a subject of academic investigation. As a pilot, it assumes a very important role in improving research tools, teaching procedures, and data gathering methodology, hence enhancing validity and reliability for a larger scale of research to be conducted.

The findings of this study could further inform curriculum planners, teacher educators, and policy makers about the need for effective early reading interventions in middle schools. Overall, the study underlines the importance of early development of English literacy and the adoption of informed, evidence-based practices in English Language Teaching.

Limitations of the Study

In addition to being of academic and professional significance, there also exist limitations within the current pilot study. Firstly, it can be said that the current study has a small sample size, including just 30 to 40 students of middle school and has chosen those selected schools of PUMS from Kanchipuram District. Secondly, the study's intervention period is shorter, having only four to six weeks. Thus, it can be noted that the intervention period might not be long enough to see the long-term changes in the reading skills of the students, especially in terms of fluency, comprehension, and so on.

Third, convenience sampling may introduce bias because the participants were selected according to ease of access rather than by random selection. For this reason, individual differences among learners in their prior exposure to English and in learning ability itself may have influenced the outcomes. Besides, the study limits itself to two reading approaches, namely strategy-based instruction and phonics-based decoding. Other forms of reading instruction, such as extensive reading or technology-assisted reading, will not be considered in this pilot study.

Thirdly, the evaluation of reading skills only seems to depend mainly on teacher-made tests and learner feedback. This could be susceptible to subjectivity. However, for the paper at hand, this study offers a preliminary analysis and could form part of a broader study in the future.



Ethical Considerations

The ethics in the study were strictly adhered to during the conduct of the pilot study. This ensured the welfare and rights of all the participants were taken care of. Previous permission for conducting the study was taken from the concerned school authorities in the case of PUMS School, Karuvevanpoondi, and PUMS Uthiramerur. Being a sensitive piece of research, with primary school students as participants, all the ethical research practices were followed carefully. Informed consent was received from the school authorities and class teachers, and the participation of students was purely on a volunteer basis. It was made clear that participants might withdraw from this study at any stage without facing any adverse consequences.

The confidentiality and anonymity of the research subjects were considered in the research. The names of the students, their identity, as well as any personal details, were not exposed in any section of the research report. The information gathered from tests, observations, and feedback was only used for academic and research requirements. The instructional interventions used in the study are beneficial in education and do not hamper the normal curriculum. There was no physical, psychological, or emotional damage/injury inflicted upon the participants in the study. Taking all into account, it can be stated that the study has been conducted in a manner that adheres to high ethical standards in carrying out the research related to early reading practices in English Language Teaching.

Conclusion

The present pilot study, "Reframing Early Reading Instruction in English Language Teaching: A Pilot Study among Middle School Students in Kanchipuram District," aimed to test the feasibility and preliminary effectiveness of selected approaches to early reading in ELT classrooms at the primary level. The interventions were carried out in PUMS School, Karuverppampooni and PUMS Uthiramerur. It was an important educational need because the research focused on foundational reading skills among young learners in government school contexts.

The results obtained in the study imply that organized and learner-focused reading pedagogy is effective in improving the reading development among students in the middle school in English language. Both strategy-based and phonics-based reading and decoding strategies were effective in enhancing the recognition and comprehension abilities among the learners. The study showed that the students gained interest in the reading lesson when the interactive and age-focused strategies were applied.

This research serves as the pilot for further studies as it successfully validated the practicability of the research instruments and the procedures used in the instruction. This helped in understanding the strengths and limitations of the research methods in adding to the



body of knowledge on how future research can be carried out on this subject. The sample of the study is short but the results provide important pointers for further research.

In particular, this study makes it clear that there is an important role for rethinking early reading skills in English Language Teaching by using context-responsive and developmentally sound approaches. Development of early reading skills in the primary years is critical for enhancing proficiency levels in English, and this pilot study represents an important first step towards this important objective.

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