

Enhancing Reading Skills of Primary School Students Structured Learning Activities

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Abstract

Structured learning activities play a significant role in enhancing the reading skills of primary grade students. The primary objective of this research is to improve the reading proficiency of students in Tamil medium schools within the Kalpitiya Division of the Puttalam Education Zone through such activities. The sub-objectives include identifying students' reading difficulties, evaluating the impact of structured learning activities on reading and comprehension skills, and comparing the progress of students participating in these activities with those in traditional classrooms. For this study, data were collected from 60 teachers using questionnaires. Additionally, 60 students were divided into an experimental group and a control group, undergoing formal pre-tests and post-tests. The collected data were analyzed using SPSS software. According to the research findings, 99% of teachers agreed that reading skills can be improved through structured learning activities. Following the implementation of these activities, students' reading proficiency increased significantly. Specifically, the average score of the experimental group rose from 30.56 to 50.33 (an increase of approximately 20%). The study reveals that activities incorporating games and phonics methods led to faster and more stable progress compared to traditional learning methods. Therefore, this research emphasizes that learning activities should be simple, guidance-oriented, and student-friendly. These recommendations are expected to serve as a guide for educational administrators and teachers to elevate the reading standards of primary grade students.

Keywords:

Primary Grade, Students, Structured Learning Activities, Reading Proficiency.

1.0 Introduction

In today's modern world, knowledge is growing day by day. Every human being has the need to acquire lifelong knowledge, intelligence, and skills. Therefore, in this advanced technological era, education stands as a support for every person to live comfortably and to develop their potential.

Reading is a fundamental scientific process of understanding written language symbols. This process can happen in many ways, primarily through sight and touch. Reading is also very important for developing writing skills. According to the saying, "Reading makes a person a complete human being," reading is essential for a person from childhood to old age. Thus, reading is an unavoidable and essential part of students' educational activities.

The school is seen as a mirror of society. It is the place where future leaders of the country learn. School activities must be well-planned to develop and improve students' reading skills. Reading ability plays an unavoidable role in educational progress. A school that cannot show progress in students' reading cannot take pride in any other achievement, because without reading, students cannot complete any school task properly. Reading must be essential for a student's future success. In this matter, not only teachers but also parents play a very important role.

This study was conducted with the objective of improving the reading skills of primary students through prescribed learning activities, based on Tamil medium schools in the Kalpitiya division, under the Puttalam Educational District of the North Western Province.

2.0 Research Background

Reading alone helps develop independent thinking and leadership skills. Reading habits act as a bridge between present and future generations in acquiring knowledge.

Our history, culture, arts, literature, and epics have come to us through reading. Similarly, future generations must receive reading from us. Therefore, we must make reading a continuous habit and teach it to our future generations.

For primary students, reading ability is a crucial aspect of their educational activities. The primary stage is the foundational period of a child's life. Supporting this idea, Ehri (2005) states: "In early education, decoding plays a key role. Decoding is recognizing words by connecting letters with sounds." To explain the importance of phonics in reading development,

reading scaffolds play a major role in improving students' reading ability (Snowling & Hulme, 2012). Through continuous practice, reading skills can be encouraged using simple stories, songs, and games (Hjetland et al., 2017).

Reading is the process of interpreting symbols, words, or sentences to obtain meaning. It is a basic skill for understanding and following information in various forms such as notices, newspapers, digital media, or documents. Reading can be done silently or aloud. Furthermore, reading is both a decoding process and a cognitive process that helps derive meaning and understand written language (Smith, 1971).

Reading is a two-way interaction between student and teacher for exchanging information (Brunan, 1989). It is a communication process where information is transferred from a sender to a receiver (Smith, 1973).

The importance of reading across the curriculum is emphasized for students' academic success. Reading should not be seen only as a separate skill but as an integrated tool for acquiring knowledge, understanding, and developing skills across all subjects. Teachers can improve students' reading comprehension, critical thinking, and writing skills by intentionally integrating reading into their lesson plans, leading to overall academic success (Horning, 2007).

Studies show that if reading difficulties occur in primary students, it affects their future educational development (Stanovich, 1986). To improve reading skills, it is important to identify students' problems and enhance their reading experience through systematic exercises and interventions (Perfetti, 1985).

Learning processes that improve reading receive less importance, which becomes a factor reducing students' language and reading ability (Perfetti & Hart, 2002).

A study by Siyama (2021) related to reading difficulties in Kalpitiya Tamil medium schools found that many primary students face reading difficulties and examined how to improve them. Rifatha (2021) studied difficulties in Tamil letters such as La, Zha, La and their differences.

The National Reading Panel (2000) outlines the components and benefits of reading instruction.

Moreover, reduced interest in reading affects learning speed. It is the school's responsibility to improve reading skills and make students excel in reading. It is essential to identify the reasons for reading difficulties and provide appropriate learning activities, guidance, and advice at the classroom level to increase students' interest in reading. Therefore, this study was conducted based on various backgrounds where it is very necessary for students to overcome reading-related difficulties and improve their reading levels.

3.0 Literature Review

A literature review is a summary and compilation of published academic works related to a specific research topic. It helps identify the background, current state of knowledge, and gaps for future research (Galvan & Galvan, 2017).

Reading brings deep and long-term benefits to children's lives. It starts in childhood and lasts throughout their lives. Although reading research is largely based on English and other languages, using certain reading frameworks in Tamil-based education poses challenges. Tamil has unique linguistic features different from English and Western languages (Safeek, 2024). Reading is a lifelong skill. It improves memory, builds a wide vocabulary, and creates deep knowledge, providing a tool and deep meaning for a fulfilling life (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985). Reading is a thinking process. It involves both implicit and explicit thinking, connecting ideas, asking questions, answering through linking opinions, and using updated information in new situations (Rubis, 2015). Reading ability is a key skill for language development and educational progress of primary students (Smith et al., 2020).

Students with reading challenges find it difficult to participate in classroom activities. Primary students must be able to read because it is a key component of academic activity (Prithivi & Ariyavan, 2017). Picture books help increase reading and memory (Greenfield, 2019). Reading comprehension is an important learning skill for all students (Clark et al., 2014). Reading and literacy play a key role in people's daily lives (Britt et al., 2018).

Globally, mastering four basic language skills – speaking, reading, and writing – has been a high priority for first and second language learners. Speaking skills remain the most challenging (Paul & Christopher, 2017). Reading activities help students recognize content provided by the teacher, develop understanding and knowledge, and feel comfortable with continuous learning. This shows that reading is a receptive skill (Evans, 2023).

Teachers must implement learning-teaching activities and use proper reading techniques and approaches so that primary students acquire correct pronunciation and mastery in reading. The

two-way relationship between teachers and students is essential in efforts to increase reading ability (Veeraratchagi, 2021).

First, students must learn to read. Then, they must be led to read for learning. Schools do not give first priority to reading, which reduces their language mastery (Schmitterer & Bord, 2021).

Reading comprehension is an important learning skill for all students (Clark et al., 2014). It is the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction with written language (Rand, 2002). Understanding word meanings, analyzing the author's views, understanding the purpose of writing, and gaining knowledge of new words support reading comprehension. Reading skills are needed for academic goals and expectations in classroom settings (Rubis, 2015).

Reading and literacy play a major role in people's daily lives (Britt et al., 2018). Reading is fundamental to our lives because it is essential for survival and necessary to detect obstacles in acquiring literacy skills (Khateb & Kochva, 2018).

Reading difficulties significantly hinder individual, social, and national progress.

Skilled readers have the ability to accurately and efficiently extract meaning from text, highlighting the value of reading ability (Petscher et al., 2019). Thirty years of reading research clearly shows that teaching comprehension strategies improves students' reading comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2000). Comprehension strategy instruction should be emphasized in primary grades when students are just beginning to read (Partnership for Reading, 2006). Picture books increase reading and memory (Greenfield, 2019).

Illiteracy or difficulties in acquiring literacy skills has become a major challenge in our society, especially as technology dependence increases. Facing these challenges is crucial for individual and collective progress (Kochva, 2018). Skilled readers accurately and efficiently extract meaning from text, emphasizing the value of reading ability (Petscher et al., 2019).

Students with reading difficulties find it hard to participate in classroom activities. Primary students must learn to read because it is a key part of educational activity (Prithivi & Ariyavan, 2017).

Reading has a profound impact on children's cognitive and language development. Children with reading ability have significantly larger vocabularies. Through new books and stories, children learn new words and their usage. This extensive vocabulary, along with improving

their native language communication skills, helps them understand and express complex ideas (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997).

Primary reading positively affects a child's entire educational journey. Children who lag in reading face difficulties in other subjects (Mathematics, Science, Social Studies). Since most subjects are based on reading, good reading ability is essential for success across all subjects, raising the child's overall academic achievement (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Primary reading ability transforms a child into a lifelong learner. Interest in reading that develops in primary grades becomes a habit that helps acquire new knowledge and skills. This builds a foundation for learning new things not only in school but also in higher education, work, and personal life (Duke, 2000).

Parents reading books to their children and participating in reading activities with them is essential for developing reading skills. Parents reading with children, discussing books, and showing that reading is a valuable activity contribute significantly to reading skills and school success (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Parental reading, especially in early childhood, directly affects children's reading skills (Baker, Serpell, & Sonnenschein, 2008). Availability of various reading materials at home (books, magazines, newspapers) increases children's interest in reading. The number of books available at home is positively correlated with children's reading skills (Evans, Kelley, Sikora, & Treiman, 2010). Creating a quiet, encouraging reading environment at home stimulates reading interest. Parental praise and encouragement increase children's reading interest and confidence (Pintrich & Schunk, 2002).

Teachers' qualifications, training, and teaching methods directly affect students' reading ability. Teachers must be well-trained to identify reading problems and use appropriate teaching strategies. Teacher knowledge and teaching skill are crucial for reading instruction success. Specifically, teachers should focus on developing children's phonological awareness and phonics skills (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Furthermore, teachers using proper and timely teaching techniques improves students' reading comprehension and fluency (Adams, 1990). The reading curriculum, content, and teaching methods (phonics, whole language, balanced approach) significantly contribute to reading development. A well structured reading curriculum should include five key components: phonological awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Direct and clear teaching methods, especially phonics instruction, improve primary students' decoding skills (Ehri, 2005).

How much a school values reading, supports learning, and encourages reading habits directly contributes to a child's reading development. Creating a school-wide reading culture helps students see reading as an enjoyable activity and improves their reading skills (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2007). Teachers act as key motivators for students to show interest in reading and make it a habit.

When students lack interest in books, especially in the digital world, teachers can increase interest by guiding, encouraging, and monitoring. Teachers acting as motivators, creators, assessors, facilitators, and energetic individuals is essential to increase reading interest (Rintang et al., 2021). Teachers' professional knowledge and skills in teaching reading strongly correlate with student achievement (Scott, 2008; Greenwald, 2011). Identifying reading barriers and implementing interventions is considered the best practice for overcoming reading failure (Hill, 2024). Teachers' contribution through remedial teaching is very significant for improving primary students' reading skills (Nation, 2019). Teacher strategies improve reading ability (Parker, 2021). Individualized learning plans combined with child learning methods have been observed to improve students' progress in reading (Adams et al., 2023).

High-practice reading activities, school support, and parental involvement play important roles (White & Black, 2023). The teacher's ultimate contribution to language learning in primary grades is essential (Kumarasamy, 2015). Primary students should be provided with learning- teaching activities, reading techniques, and approaches to acquire reading skills with correct pronunciation (Veeraratchagi, 2021).

Teachers act as key resources to develop students' reading interest and improve reading ability (Smith & Johnson, 2010). Teachers must develop a learning culture that prioritizes improving students' reading ability. Reading instruction is crucial for a school's overall development (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood et al., 2008).

Principals must ensure teachers receive necessary training and resources for effective reading instruction. Professional development programs should be arranged to keep teachers informed about new methods, techniques, and technologies in reading instruction (Supovitz & Sirinides, 2018). They must continuously monitor the reading curriculum's effectiveness through classroom observations and reviewing student achievement data (Fullan, 2016).

Challenges exist in effectively implementing prescribed learning activities in classrooms. Ensuring adequate teacher training and resources is essential. More research is needed on adapting activities for

students from diverse backgrounds (Garcia & Rodriguez, 2015). Principals should recognize parents' role in reading development and create strong school- parent connections through meetings and reading workshops (Epstein, 2009).

Kalpitiya is part of Puttalam District. Studies on reading levels in Puttalam schools highlight key issues. Kalpitiya is a coastal area where most people depend on fishing and farming. Low socio-economic background, lack of reading resources at home, and low parental education can affect children's reading development (Neuman & Celano, 2001).

In a Kalpitiya school survey, 78.7% of teachers considered reading difficulties a major obstacle. 85% reported that teaching students with reading challenges is very difficult. 82.3% emphasized the need for a structured teaching module for reading instruction (Abayagunawardhana et al., 2021). Modern teaching techniques and tools for children facing reading and writing difficulties are discussed (Nithiyanandan, 2018). Efforts to improve reading through interesting content like stories and rhymes (Solomon, A.S., 2019).

4.0 Research Problem

Reading ability is crucial for students' school learning activities and future academic achievements. This study focuses specifically on improving reading skills in primary students of Tamil medium schools in Kalpitiya zone. In the modern world, students are more interested in technology, neglecting learning and reading. Spending excessive time on screens (TV, smartphone, tablet) increases distraction and reduces time for learning and reading (Rideout et al., 2010).

Multitasking distracts students and reduces their ability to focus completely on one thing, hindering deep learning and reading comprehension (Richtel, 2010). Home literacy environment plays a key role in developing pre-school and primary students' reading ability and interest. Parental reading habits, availability of reading materials, parental engagement in literacy activities, and encouragement significantly improve children's reading ability and interest (Yeo, Ong, & Ng, 2014). Primary students' reading is hindered by various factors, affecting their educational development and overall learning

experience. These factors include: ·
Phonological Awareness: Difficulty identifying and manipulating individual sounds (phonemes) in words severely affects decoding skills (Sanford, 2015). ·

Fluency: Lack of automaticity and speed in word recognition affects reading speed and comprehension (Capellini & Germano, 2018).

·Limited Early Literacy Exposure: Low exposure to books, not being read to, and lack of early literacy activities mean children often start school at a disadvantage (Readabilitytutor, 2023).

Socio-Economic Factors: Children from lower socio-economic backgrounds have less access to reading materials and literacy-rich environments (Readabilitytutor, 2023). ·

Poor classroom environment: Poor ventilation, inadequate lighting, excessive noise, or uncomfortable temperatures affect attention and learning (Earthman, 2004). ·

Overcrowded classrooms: Lack of personal space, discomfort, and distraction affect learning (Kshetrantel et al., 2017). ·

Non-literate students: Students without literacy struggle to interact with teachers and peers and follow the curriculum (Evertson & Weinstein, 2013).

Pre-testing to identify struggling readers, diagnosing them, and then improving their learning activities is a key approach to enhancing reading ability (Lyon et al., 2003). Encouraging primary students' reading ability, providing prescribed learning activities, exercises, and support is essential (Ecklund & Lamon, 2008).

A study by Siyama (2021) in Kalpitiya division Tamil medium schools found that many primary students face reading difficulties and examined how to improve them. Rifatha (2021) studied difficulties in Tamil letters La, Zha, La and recommended improving students' reading ability. The National Reading Panel (2000) outlines reading instruction components. Torgesen et al. (2006) provided interventions for primary students' reading ability. Most of these studies confirm that struggling readers are identified and efforts are made to improve their reading. Primary students' reading difficulties affect their future educational progress (Stanovich, 1986). Identifying problems and using systematic exercises and interventions can improve reading experience (Perfetti, 1985). Reduced focus on reading improvement

learning processes lowers students' language and reading ability (Perfetti & Hart, 2002).

In Puttalam District, Kalpitiya zone Tamil medium primary students' reading ability is found to be low. This study aims to improve that ability. Students struggling with reading have been identified and are being provided remedial instruction. In this process, this research has been conducted among 60 primary students in Kalpitiya Tamil medium schools.

5.0 Research Objectives

This study aims to improve the reading skills of selected primary students in Kalpitiya division Tamil medium schools through prescribed learning activities. The following sub-objectives are set:

1. To identify the reading difficulties of primary school students.
2. To assess the impact of prescribed learning activities on the reading ability and comprehension of primary school students.
3. To compare the reading progress of primary school students who participated in prescribed learning activities with those who learned in regular classrooms.

6.0 Research Methodology

In educational research, quantitative studies are widely conducted. Such studies help identify factors related to an educational issue, understand advantages and disadvantages of their interrelationships, seek solutions, and carry out activities based on them.

This study includes two types of research methods: a survey method and a quasi-experimental method. Since quantitative and experimental data are used, this is an experimental study, with an experimental group, control group, pre-test, post-test, and questionnaire.

Data were collected from primary teachers through a survey to determine whether there is a need to develop or improve primary students' reading. Even though such needs were identified earlier, the gap was long, so this survey was conducted to find current needs. Teachers in Kalpitiya division Tamil medium schools were given questionnaires.

The study used a quasi-experimental method with 60 primary students: 30 in the experimental group and 30 in the control group. A pre-test and post-test were

conducted. The study uses quantitative and experimental data. Questionnaires, interviews, and controlled experiments were used for data collection. Using a quasi-experimental method helped measure reading ability both quantitatively and experimentally.

6.1 Population

The study population includes 73 teachers teaching primary classes and 95 students struggling with reading in Kalpitiya division Tamil medium schools.

Sample Teachers and struggling readers were the main respondents. According to the Krejcie- Morgan table, 60 primary teachers were sampled. Using purposive sampling, 60 struggling readers (30 control, 30 experimental) were selected.

6.2 Research Tools

Two types of tools were used: questionnaires for teachers and pre-test/post-test for remedial teaching.

6.3 Data Collection

6.3.1 Questionnaire

Since teachers were the main sample, a questionnaire was used for quick, low-cost data collection. The questionnaire had 5 sections. Section 1 had basic details; the other 4 used a 5-point Likert scale. Questionnaires were copied, delivered in person, and collected. Some teachers were absent; two days were given. Missing questionnaires were re-copied and reissued. Data from 70 teachers was successfully collected.

6.3.2 Experiment

Pre-test and post-test were conducted. Before starting, a pre-test determined students' level. After 8 weeks of remedial teaching, a post-test was conducted. The control group received 8 weeks of systematic remedial teaching. Results were compared using t-test analysis. Forty lesson periods (one hour daily for eight weeks) with five proficiency units were provided. Student interest and engagement were observed, and feedback given.

6.3.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis is essential for finding solutions. Teacher questionnaire data were compiled and presented using descriptive statistics (mean, median). SPSS version 26 was used.

Independent t-test was used for pre-test scores (experimental vs. control). Basic questions were analyzed using frequency tables. Descriptive statistics were used for sections 2–6

7.0 Findings

60 teachers, 65.0% (39) were female, 21.0% (35) were male. Most teachers (66.7% – 40

teachers) had 11–20 students in their class. 48.3% (29) taught Grade 4, 28.3% (17) taught Grade

4. Regarding qualifications: 35.0% (21) held a Postgraduate Diploma in Education, 25.0% (12) were trained teachers. Most teachers (36.7%) had 6–10 years of teaching experience.

Objective.1.–Identifying Reading Difficulties:

Teachers strongly agreed (mean 4.38) that students face reading difficulties. They also agreed (mean 4.25) that these difficulties can be remedied. Most disagreed that struggling readers lack intelligence – they are like normal students. Teachers agreed (mean 4.18) that struggling readers have difficulty identifying letters, and (mean 4.38) difficulty identifying sounds. Most agreed (mean 4.32) that struggling readers eventually start reading. They agreed remedial exercises can reduce difficulties.

Reading Instruction for Primary Students: Teachers strongly agreed (mean 4.73) that reading ability is critical for educational achievement. They agreed (mean 4.52) that remedial instruction improves reading ability. However, they were less supportive (mean 3.88) that the regular school curriculum alone is sufficient to improve struggling readers. They strongly agreed (mean 4.67) that a systematically planned remedial module is necessary. Teachers agreed (mean 4.43) that learning various sound patterns of letters improves reading. They agreed (mean 4.13) that morphology and word explanations improve reading. They agreed (mean 4.40) that reading with understanding (meaning-based reading) stimulates students toward reading. Teachers agreed (mean 4.38) that repeated reading improves comprehension and reading ability. They agreed (mean 4.40) that multi-sensory teaching can be used in remedial teaching. They strongly agreed (mean 4.65) that multimedia teaching attracts students

to learning and suits language activities. They strongly agreed (mean 4.75) that guided lesson planning and modular remedial teaching is necessary. They strongly agreed (mean 4.76) that a student exercise book is essential for remedial teaching. They most strongly agreed (mean 4.87) that the student exercise book must contain sufficient exercises.

Objective 2 – Impact of Prescribed Learning Activities: For the experimental group, the pre- test mean score was 30.57. After the prescribed learning activities, the post-test mean score rose to 50.33 – an increase of nearly 20%. The t-value increased from 9.643 (pre-test) to 41.258 (post-test), with significance .000 (0.05) confirming that the results are accurate and not by chance.

Objective 3 – Comparison with Normal Classroom Learning: Among 60 students, the control group's pre test mean was 17% higher than the experimental group's pre-test mean. Independent samples t-test results showed a significant difference in learning achievement between the experimental group (received prescribed activities) and control group (normal instruction). This proves the training had a positive impact on student progress.

8.0 Discussion

The findings align with previous research: Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson (1985) stated reading is a lifelong skill that improves memory, vocabulary, and knowledge. This study's teachers (4.15%) agreed reading ability can be improved through comprehension. · E Gough & Tunmer (1986) described reading as a product of decoding and comprehension. This study's teachers (4.13%) agreed that explaining word morphology and word meanings improves reading. · Smith et al. (2020) stated reading ability is key for language development and educational progress. This study's teachers (4.65%) agreed multimedia teaching attracts students and suits language activities. · Prithivi & Ariyavan (2017) found students with reading difficulties struggle in class activities. This study's teachers (4.23%) agreed. · Language skill improvement games (2019) showed games can improve language skills. This study's teachers (4.53%) agreed. The

