

Investigating Sindhi and Urdu Speaking Learners' Educational Background and its Influence on their English Reading Proficiency at the University of Sindh

Abstract

This paper analyses Sindhi and Urdu learners' educational background and its influence on their English reading proficiency at the University of Sindh, Pakistan. 120 First year undergraduate participants from Sindhi (n=64) and Urdu speaking (n=56) groups were interviewed. The data were analyzed through quantitative content analysis method. The findings suggested that Sindhi and Urdu learners may differ in terms of the educational background and reading proficiency in English. It was also identified that educational background plays a pivotal role in English reading proficiency of learners at higher educational level.

Keywords: *Sindhi, Urdu, learners, English reading proficiency, educational background*

INTRODUCTION

University students are required to be proficient in English reading in different ESL contexts (Bolton and Kuteeva, 2012). This is because reading enables students to develop mental capacities and critical thinking (Cunningham and Stanovich, 2001,

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Pretorius and Machet, 2004). In order to be proficient readers and gain success in reading, learners need to read fluently and efficiently. However, the difficulties and problems faced by second language learners in English reading may affect their reading interest and proficiency in English (Nuttall, 1982). A large body of literature questions EFL learners' reading skills and proficiency. Iqbal and Shehzadi (2002) state that many Pakistani students do not have necessary English reading skills; therefore, they lack English reading proficiency. Similarly, Lei et al. (2010) found that students from diverse literacy environments usually lack basic reading skills. The University of Sindh also accommodates learners with different educational experiences in schools (Rahman, 1997). A large section of the learner population belongs to either Sindhi or Urdu speaking community. Sindhi learners predominantly come from rural parts of Sindh whereas the majority of Urdu students have urban background. The majority of students lack English reading proficiency and face difficulties in coping with English texts and do not understand meanings of simple words and grammatical structures. There is a strong possibility that Sindhi students do not have a conducive environment for learning due to which they may have a lower reading proficiency and reading skills as compared to Urdu speaking students. There is little research on the impact of educational background on learners' English reading proficiency in general (Davison, Hammer, and Lawrence, 2011) and in the Pakistani context in particular. Therefore, this paper compares Urdu and Sindhi students in terms of their educational background and reading proficiency in English. This study will offer an understanding of learners' educational background and its influence on their English reading proficiency at the university level.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Pretorius and Machet (2004), argue that if learners do not read effectively, they may not achieve adequate school grades. University students in various non-English speaking countries including Pakistan are supposed to have high proficiency in English reading (Akabuike and Asika, 2012). However, a number of studies suggest that many second language learners lack competence in English language (Evans and Morrison, 2011; Sert, 2008). Wallace (2007), found that the majority of English language learners' reading proficiency was below their academic grade level. Also, students from diverse educational backgrounds differ in their reading proficiency (Reese and Gallimore, 2000) due to different educational experiences (Yaylı, 2010). According to Shi (2013), ESL learners' previous schooling experience greatly influences their literacy learning and reading achievements in second language. Bornstein and Cheah (2005), argue that the schools which encourage reading produce efficient readers. Moreover, a significant element of schooling in many

developing countries is that of varying standards of rural and urban schools (Zhang, 2006). This factor has been consistently reported to have a great impact on the reading acquisition of school children. Ross and Zuze (2004), for instance, studied differences between school children's educational background and its impact on their English reading achievement. The participants were selected from 14 school systems in rural and urban parts of western and southern Africa in the years between 2000 and 2002. It was found that children from urban schools consistently showed higher reading proficiency scores than those from rural schools. The higher achievement of urban-school students was linked with facilities given to them in schools, whereas rural schools did not offer any elementary learning aids to children. Similarly another research on educational background of urban and rural secondary schools in thirty provinces found unexpected variations between percentage of urban (m=62%) and rural (8%) secondary school students for academic achievement and language proficiency (Qian and Smyth, 2008).

In Pakistan also, a few studies such as Husain and Qasim's (2005), found inequalities in terms of literacy learning and English reading achievement among rural and urban areas of the country. Similarly, Zarif et al., (2014), in the year 2010-11, found a high dropout rate of 5th – 6th grade learners in a rural district of Sindh - Thatta. The study determined that poor learning facilities provided in schools were a major cause of increasing student dropout tendency. On the other hand, a few studies comparing urban and rural school students in Pakistan identify that students from urban schools in cities demonstrate higher English language competence as compared to those who study in rural schools in villages or small towns (Naqvi, 1999). In another study, (Khalique, 2006) English is also considered as an alien language in non-English medium schools, and teachers' lack of ability to teach English results in students' minimal (if any) English language skills.

The review of literature suggests that students' educational background may greatly influence their literacy development and English reading proficiency. Sindhi students mostly belong to rural Sindh where schools fail to offer supporting materials and equipment for English language learning in various respects (zarifet al., 2014). Hence, it may be possible that Sindhi and Urdu learners in this study may have variations among them in terms of their English reading proficiency owing to their different educational backgrounds. This paper offers a chance to study learners' educational background and its influence on their English reading proficiency and simultaneously compare Sindhi and Urdu speaking students in terms of their previous education and English reading proficiency.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopted mixed methods approach following both quantitative and qualitative methods of inquiry. The quantitative method was useful in two ways: to have a clear understanding of educational background and reading proficiency of Sindhi and Urdu participants (Creswell, 2013) and b) to compare both groups on the same. On the other hand, qualitative method helps to gain a more detailed understanding of the phenomena from the respondents' point of view (Bryman, 2004). It may be noted here that this study is dominantly quantitative in nature; hence, in-depth qualitative enquiry was not sought.

Research Questions

This paper addresses two research questions in order to offer a clear understanding of Sindhi and Urdu students' educational background and English reading proficiency at the University of Sindh, Pakistan.

R Q 1. What is the educational background of Sindhi and Urdu learners at the University of Sindh?

R Q 2. How far does the Urdu and Sindhi learners' educational background influence their English reading proficiency?

Research Instrument

This paper looks into the educational background and its influence on reading proficiency of Sindhi and Urdu speaking students. Hence, the data were collected through interviews following an interview schedule. The interview questions were designed in such a way that students were asked about their educational background, specifically when they started learning English, their access to books and reading materials in English and encouragement from teachers to read in English during school life. In order to determine Sindhi and Urdu speaking respondents' English reading proficiency the respondents were asked how they would rate their reading proficiency in English, the causes of their high/low reading proficiency in English and whether they are able to understand the gist of a reading passage (through context) if they do not know the meaning of some or all words in English. In addition, the participants were asked about their educational background and its influence on their English reading proficiency to address RQ2 comprehensively. The study was carried out at the Faculty of Arts, University of Sindh. 120 participants from Sindhi (n=64) and Urdu (n=56) speaking groups were selected through stratified random sampling method. This sampling method is useful because it does not only help to divide the population into Sindhi and Urdu speaking groups but also

compare them in terms of their educational background and English reading proficiency, which was the main objective of this study. One of the researchers carried out all the interviews. Each respondent was facilitated to answer the questions clearly and openly in the following languages i.e. Sindhi, Urdu or English. Each interview was recorded using a sound recorder. The length of the interviews was between seven to fifteen minutes.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

A researcher, analysing interview data, searches for the meaning of the words and actions of the respondents in a research (Maykut and Morehouse, 2002). In this study quantitative content analysis method was adopted to analyse the data since it is considered an appropriate method for the quantitative dominant mixed methods study (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2009). This method served various purposes such as helping to

- a) Understand and analyze verbal data in a systematic way by extracting interesting and meaningful contents (Bryman, 2004)
- b) Comparing Sindhi and Urdu speaking groups in respect of their educational background and English reading proficiency by computing the frequency of important similar contents (Creswell, 2009) and
- c) Present verbal responses in their original form qualitatively.

Both Sindhi and Urdu speaking respondents were assigned numbers, with Sindhi speaking participants being given numbers from S1 to S64, whereas Urdu speaking participants were given numbers from U65 to U120. All recorded interviews were analysed by listening to and simultaneously taking notes of important information. An Excel spreadsheet was used to identify contents and tabulate them under similar categories. This procedure helped make a trustworthy presentation of the raw data without ignoring any important information.

Educational Background of Sindhi and Urdu Speaking Learners

Research Question1 (RQ1) was designed to elicit information about Sindhi and Urdu speaking students' educational background owing to which they may differ in terms of English reading proficiency and achievement. Literature informs that learners' school environment (Mckool, 2007) includes facilities in school and availability of learning resources (Tella and Akande, 2007; Nassimbeni and Desmond, 2011), the time spent with English language, and encouragement from teachers' influence on students' reading proficiency (Chen, 2007). Thus, all the respondents were inquired about the time they had spent in English learning, facilities in schools in the past and

support from teachers. Table 1 illustrates both Sindhi and Urdu speaking groups had spent different number of years in English studies before joining the university.

Table 1:
Time spent in English learning

Time in English Language	Sindhi (S)	Urdu (U)
I started English from 6 th grade onwards = 7 years	53 (82.81)	9 (16.07)
I learnt it from Pre-nursery class =12 years	7 (10.93)	41 (73.21)
From school life grade 2,3 or 4= 8 to 10	4 (6.25)	6 (10.71)
Total number and percent	64 (100%)	56 (100%)

Table 1 suggests that the majority of Sindhi speaking learners studied English in school at a later stage as compared to Urdu speaking students. A majority of the Sindhi speaking respondents (n=53, 82.81%) informed that they learned English ‘from Grade VI onwards’ (7 years in total). On the contrary, many Urdu speaking participants (n=41, 73.21%) learned English from Grade I or earlier (Pre-nursery onwards, 12 or more years in total). Reporting on the issue of time spent on English in school, a Sindhi speaking respondent (S61) emphasised: ‘I learnt English in 6th class for the first time I studied ABC and Teachers at school were teaching us tenses only’. Unlike Sindhi speaking respondents, a large number of Urdu speaking respondents informed that they studied English from pre-nursery class. One of the Urdu speaking students (U75) stated: ‘I am studying English, you may say since my birth, for approximately 14 years. It was my pre-nursery class when I first learned ABC’. In addition, students were asked about learning facilities in school in the past, which are very much necessary for EFL/ESL learners in L2 reading comprehension (Kirchhoff, 2013). Table 2 compares Urdu and Sindhi speaking students in terms of learning facilities at their schools in the past.

Table 2:
Facilities at schools in the Past

Learning facilities and reading materials in English at school	Sindhi (S)	Urdu (U)
I was totally involved in English studies because we had everything for English learning.	7 (10.93)	40 (71.40)
No facilities, no books and furniture	32 (50)	4 (7.14)
Not much because I was in Urdu/Sindhi medium school.	7 (10.93)	8 (14.28)
Teachers were not regular in government school.	10 (15.62)	
Books not available, if they had been available I would	4 (6.25)	1 (1.78)

have read more.		
Not much, because there was no environment of English	4 (6.25)	3 (5.35)
Total number and percentage	64 (100%)	56 (100%)

Table 2 clearly displays that many Urdu speaking students were offered various facilities for English learning (n = 40, 71.40%), whereas 50% of the Sindhi students (n = 32) complained that they did not have books or reading materials in English at school. Although a few Urdu speaking students made the same complaint; they were very small in number (n=4, 7.14%).

Interestingly, some Sindhi speaking students (n=10, 15.62%) complained about availability of teachers in government schools though this was not the case with Urdu speaking learners. Similarly, a small number of Sindhi respondents complained against the non-availability of teachers, this matter was of great concern because it may be related to cultural values assigned to education by teachers in Sindhi schools. Highlighting the non-availability of learning facilities, one Sindhi speaking respondent (S11) complained: *'There were no facilities; even there were no books and furniture in the school'*. Another Sindhi respondent (S50) also reported the same view: *'When we went to school our teachers did not come. Even classes were not taken properly in government schools'*. Unlike Sindhi speaking students, the large majority of Urdu speaking students asserted good facilities in schools for learning English. One of the Urdu respondents (U92) suggesting this view said: *'In school I was fully involved in English we were provided all facilities to learn English at school'*. Accordingly, both the Sindhi and Urdu speaking participants were questioned about teachers' encouragement and support in English reading because it has been reported as an important source in language learning. Table 3 shows Sindhi and Urdu speaking students' responses regarding teachers' support in schools for English learning.

Table 3:
Teachers' Encouragement in Reading

Teachers' support to read in English	Sindhi (S)	Urdu
My teachers always supported us to read in English.	10(15.62)	35 (62.5)
Teachers always said me to learn English; it is a key to success.	7 (10.93)	12 (21.42)
No encouragement by teachers, they were not good.	32 (50)	5 (8.92)
Teachers' knowledge in English was poor.	15 (23.43)	4 (7.14)
Total number and per cent	64 (100%)	56 (100%)

Table 3 shows a higher number of Urdu speaking respondents (n=35, 62.5%) than Sindhi speaking (n=10, 15.62%) learners on teachers support for English reading at school. It also identifies that 50% of Sindhi students (n=32) did not get any support for reading in English from their teachers. Suggesting this view a Sindhi respondent (S28) expressed: *'Mostly our teachers did not come in time, if teachers came, they could help us, but there was no support'*. In contrast, one Urdu speaking student expressed support from teachers:

'My teachers were good really; they always asked us to read English novels and due to this in grade 4; I started reading English novels (U82)'.

This view suggests that Urdu speaking participants were encouraged by their teachers during school life more than Sindhi speaking respondents. In general, the findings with respect to RQ1 clearly suggest that there were considerable variations between Sindhi and Urdu groups in respect of their educational background. Sindhi speaking students appear to have had fewer resources in their schools as compared to urban schools. This situation indicates that there is discrimination in the education system of Sindh, regarding the provision of learning resources. Thus, government should take immediate measures to provide equal resources to all schools. This could be done by providing additional funding to rural schools and establishing more libraries in all schools, rural schools in particular. Some Sindhi speaking students also complained that no teachers were available to them in government schools. It is also possible that there is little, if any, concern for children's education among teachers in rural areas, which is evident from the Sindhi speaking students' responses shown in Table 2 and Table 3. In order to improve this situation, a monitoring system may be implemented to assure teacher attendance in schools. Teachers in rural schools may also be instructed to play a more active role in promoting reading among their students. This can be done by providing opportunities to the school children for more extensive reading in English. On the whole, this study supports the conclusions of Krashen (2011) and Mckool (2007) who identified that learners from rural backgrounds had fewer learning resources in school and little support from teachers in learning and reading as compared to urban students. These findings also support the view that Urdu speaking students come from more privileged educational backgrounds as compared to Sindhi speaking learners at the University of Sindh.

Students' Perceptions of their English Reading Proficiency

In order to assess the participants' English reading proficiency from their own point of view and address RQ2, the participants were asked how they rate their English

reading proficiency (Hsu *et al.*, 2012), and how much they comprehend the gist of a passage in English, even if they do not know the meaning of some/all the words in that passage. Table 4 illustrates how both Sindhi and Urdu speaking students rated/ranked their English reading proficiency.

Table 4:
Students' Rating of their English Reading Proficiency

Q 4 Students' rating of English reading proficiency	Sindhi	Urdu
80%; for some words I still use the dictionary (80% above)	15 (23.43)	35 (62.5)
Average in English reading (60 to 75%)	17 (26.55)	12 (21.42)
Below average (50% or below)	32 (50)	9 (16.07)
Total number and percentage	64 (100%)	56 (100%)

In Table 4 more Urdu speaking ($n = 35$, 62.5%) and fewer Sindhi speaking learners ($n = 15$, 23.43%) were found to have a high reading proficiency in English (80% or above). The majority of Sindhi speaking students appears to be below average ($n = 50$, 50%) in their reading proficiency in English. However, only nine ($n = 9$, 16.07%) Urdu speaking students are found to have a poor reading comprehension level in English. Rating/ranking English reading proficiency, a Sindhi speaking respondent (S1), said: *'I have low reading proficiency in English; I find it difficult to read in English.* Very few Sindhi speaking students claimed to understand 80%, one of them (S10) reported: *'I will say '80% I do and for some words I use dictionary'.* Besides, reporting on English reading proficiency an Urdu speaking respondent (U99) said:

If the text is not complicated, then I understand 90%, otherwise, 85%. I can read and understand very well, I enjoy English reading.

These findings indicate that the number of Urdu speaking learners claiming high reading proficiency in English is much higher than Sindhi speaking learners in this study. Students were also asked whether they understand the gist of a passage in English if they do not know the meaning of some or all the words in that passage), the results are tabulated in Table 5.

Table 0:
Students' Understanding of the Gist of an English Passage

Understanding the gist of what you read.	Sindhi	Urdu
I don't use the dictionary/I try to guess the meaning	7 (10.93)	12 (21.42)
Mostly I understand the gist, I have no difficulty in English reading	15 (23.43)	28 (50)
Not every time, only sometimes I understand the gist	16 (25)	10 (17.85)
Not really, I can't completely understand passages in English	26 (40.63)	6 (10.71)
Total number and percentage	64 (100%)	56 (100%)

Table 5 clearly shows that more Urdu speaking learners (n=28, 50%) reported to have a high understanding of English text through context as compared to Sindhi speaking students (n=15, 23.43). Additionally, a large number of Sindhi speaking respondents (26, 40.63%) reported that 'they can't completely understand passages in English' whereas only six Urdu speaking (n=6, 10.71) respondents considered their understanding of English to be poor. The findings in respect of Sindhi and Urdu speaking students' English reading proficiency determine that more Urdu speaking learners not only rate their English reading proficiency higher than Sindhi speaking learners but they also consider themselves better in terms of guessing meaning through context. Thus it may be concluded from this study that Urdu speaking learners have high reading proficiency, which is possibly due to their educational background. In order to confirm these findings further, and address RQ2, the participants' were asked (from their own point of view) regarding the influence of their educational background on their English reading proficiency. Table 6 displays how both the Sindhi and Urdu speaking students responded to the question.

Table 6:
Students' Educational Background and English Reading Proficiency

Q 6 Previous schooling and its influence on English reading	Sindhi(S)	Urdu (U)
I understand English text after a lot of struggle. We did not get any chance to learn English at school.	10 (15.62)	4 (7.14)
I do not fully understand English and our school was not English medium.	20 (31.25)	12 (21.42)
I think my school education was everything for me; we got a	16 (25)	35 (62.5)

full learning environment in English, which made me a better reader.		
I am poor in English language because our schools did not help.	20 (31.25)	5 (8.92)
Total number and percentage	64 (100%)	56 (100%)

Table 6 shows a higher number of Urdu (n = 35, 62.5%) than Sindhi speaking respondents (n = 16, 25%) reported better learning facilities in school. A large majority of Sindhi speaking students (n = 50, 75%) suggest, in various ways, that their reading proficiency in English is low because of their schools. Talking about educational background and English reading proficiency, a Sindhi interviewee (S1), said:

'We are from rural Sindh, our schools do not have any facility, mostly our school was closed and I do not know what English is'.

On the contrary, an Urdu speaking respondent (U85) said:

'I understand about 90% of the text if it is not complicated. I can understand English well; all this is possible because my school was fully English'.

These findings indicate that the number and percentage of Urdu speaking respondents with better reading proficiency in English was higher than Sindhi speaking ones as can be seen in Table 6, which is possibly due to their educational background. Thus, this article extends the findings of Anderson *et al.*, (1988), Nassimbeni and Desmond, (2011) suggest that school environment and teachers' support may have a great influence on literacy acquisition of students at the level of higher education.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Sindhi and Urdu speaking learners' at the University of Sindh come from diverse educational backgrounds and for this reason it explores similarities and differences between Urdu and Sindhi speaking groups regarding their English reading proficiency. The findings determine that Urdu speaking learners' English reading proficiency is higher than that of Sindhi speaking students; this may possibly be due to their educational background. This study therefore recommends that Sindhi speaking learners may be provided more learning opportunities at schools and that school teachers need to pay more attention towards students' reading proficiency in English.

Limitations and future directions

This study has a few limitations since only first year participants were sampled because they have low reading proficiency level in English. The second limitation is that a few leading questions were asked to collect the data. This study may, therefore, be useful to explore students' reading educational background and reading proficiency through a more qualitative approach.

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