

Psychological and Pedagogical Bases for Forming English Reading Skills Among Primary School Pupils

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Abstract: This article examines the psychological and pedagogical foundations underlying the development of English reading skills in primary school students. The research analyzes cognitive processes involved in early literacy acquisition, explores age-appropriate methodological approaches, and investigates the intersection of psychological readiness and pedagogical strategies. Through a mixed-methods approach combining classroom observations, experimental teaching interventions, and assessment data from 120 primary school pupils aged 7-10, the study identifies critical factors influencing reading skill formation. Results demonstrate that integrated approaches combining phonological awareness training, vocabulary development, and meaningful context-based instruction yield significantly better outcomes than traditional methods. The findings emphasize the importance of considering psychological readiness, motivation, and individual learning styles when designing reading instruction programs for young English language learners.

Keywords: Reading skills, primary education, psychological foundations, pedagogical methods, phonological awareness, literacy development, English language learning, cognitive processes, early childhood education, language acquisition.

Introduction: Reading proficiency serves as a cornerstone of academic success and lifelong learning, particularly when acquiring a foreign language during formative educational years. For primary school pupils, developing English reading skills presents unique challenges that require careful consideration of both psychological development and pedagogical methodology. The complexity of English orthography, combined with the cognitive demands of decoding in a non-native language, necessitates approaches grounded in understanding child psychology and effective teaching practices.

Contemporary research in applied linguistics and educational psychology has established that reading is not merely a mechanical skill but a complex cognitive process involving multiple interconnected components including phonological processing, orthographic recognition, vocabulary knowledge, syntactic awareness, and comprehension strategies. When these processes occur in a second language context, additional factors such as cross-linguistic transfer, metalinguistic awareness, and motivational variables

come into play.

The primary school years represent a critical period for literacy development, characterized by rapid cognitive growth, increasing metalinguistic awareness, and heightened neuroplasticity. Understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying reading acquisition during this developmental stage enables educators to design interventions that align with children's cognitive capabilities while fostering sustainable skill development.

This research addresses the fundamental question of how psychological and pedagogical principles can be synthesized to optimize English reading instruction for primary school learners. The study aims to identify evidence-based practices that accommodate developmental readiness while promoting engagement, comprehension, and autonomous reading behavior.

Literature analysis. Cognitive psychology research has extensively documented the mental processes involved in reading acquisition. Perfetti's (1985) verbal efficiency theory posits that reading comprehension depends on

the automatic recognition of words, freeing cognitive resources for higher-order meaning construction. For primary school children learning English as a foreign language, achieving this automaticity requires systematic development of foundational skills.

Developmental psychologists emphasize that children aged 6-10 are in what Piaget termed the concrete operational stage, characterized by logical thinking about concrete objects and events. This cognitive profile suggests that reading instruction should incorporate tangible, contextually relevant materials that connect abstract linguistic symbols to children's lived experiences.

Research by Goswami (2015) on phonological development demonstrates that children's sensitivity to sound structures in language follows predictable developmental trajectories, progressing from syllable awareness to onset-rime recognition and finally to phonemic awareness. These findings have profound implications for sequencing reading instruction, particularly in languages like English with complex phoneme-grapheme correspondences.

The field of language pedagogy has witnessed ongoing debates regarding optimal approaches to reading instruction. Synthetic phonics methods, which emphasize explicit teaching of letter-sound relationships and blending skills, have demonstrated effectiveness in multiple research contexts. A comprehensive study by Johnston and Watson (2005) found that synthetic phonics instruction produced superior reading and spelling outcomes compared to analytic phonics or mixed methods.

However, whole language advocates argue that reading emerges naturally through meaningful exposure to print in authentic contexts. Goodman's (1967) psycholinguistic model conceptualizes reading as a "psycholinguistic guessing game" where readers use contextual cues and prior knowledge to construct meaning. While pure whole language approaches have fallen from favor, the emphasis on meaning-making and authentic texts remains influential.

Contemporary best practices increasingly advocate for balanced literacy approaches that integrate systematic skills instruction with meaningful reading experiences. The National Reading Panel (2000) identified five essential components of effective reading instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Research suggests that successful programs address all these components in developmentally appropriate ways.

Reading in a second language presents additional complexities beyond first language literacy development. Koda (2007) emphasizes that L2 reading

is influenced by multiple factors including L1 literacy skills, cross-linguistic differences, L2 proficiency, and metacognitive strategies. Transfer effects from first language reading can be both facilitative and inhibitory, depending on orthographic and phonological similarities between languages.

For young learners whose L1 literacy is still developing, simultaneous acquisition of reading skills in two languages requires careful coordination. Research by Bialystok (2007) demonstrates that bilingual children often develop enhanced metalinguistic awareness, potentially facilitating reading development when instruction is appropriately designed.

Grabe's (2009) interactive model of L2 reading emphasizes the simultaneous operation of multiple processing systems including automatic word recognition, vocabulary knowledge, grammatical knowledge, and discourse processing. This framework highlights the need for comprehensive approaches that develop multiple competencies rather than focusing narrowly on single skills.

Understanding the unique characteristics of primary school children is essential for effective reading instruction. Research by Cameron (2001) identifies several key features of young language learners including limited attention spans, concrete thinking patterns, enthusiasm for learning through play, and sensitivity to teacher approval and peer relationships.

Motivational research by Ryan and Deci (2000) emphasizes the importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering intrinsic motivation. For reading instruction, this translates to providing choices, ensuring success experiences through appropriately leveled materials, and creating collaborative learning environments.

Neuroeducational research reveals that primary school years coincide with continued development of brain regions involved in reading, including areas responsible for phonological processing, orthographic recognition, and semantic processing. Understanding these neurological foundations enables educators to design instruction that supports optimal neural pathway development.

Methods

Research design. This study employed a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative experimental methods with qualitative classroom observations to comprehensively investigate psychological and pedagogical factors in reading skill development. The research was conducted over one academic year (2024-2025) in three public primary schools in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

Participants

The study involved 120 primary school pupils aged 7-10 years (grades 2-4), divided into experimental and control groups of 60 students each. Participants were selected through stratified random sampling to ensure representation across grade levels, gender (48% male, 52% female), and initial English proficiency levels. All participants were native Uzbek speakers with limited prior English exposure outside school settings.

Experimental intervention. The experimental group received instruction based on an integrated approach combining psychological principles and evidence-based pedagogical practices. Key components included:

Phonological awareness training: Systematic activities developing syllable awareness, rhyme recognition, and phoneme manipulation using multisensory techniques.

Synthetic phonics instruction: Explicit teaching of grapheme-phoneme correspondences using a structured progression.

Vocabulary development: Context-rich vocabulary instruction with visual supports and semantic mapping.

Fluency practice: Repeated reading activities with appropriate scaffolding and feedback.

Comprehension strategies: Explicit instruction in prediction, questioning, summarizing, and making connections.

Motivational supports: Choice in reading materials, collaborative activities, and achievement celebration.

The control group received traditional instruction emphasizing memorization, translation, and discrete skill exercises typical of conventional EFL classrooms.

Data collection instruments. Multiple instruments were employed to assess reading development and document pedagogical processes:

Standardized reading assessments: Pre-test and post-test measures of phonological awareness, decoding accuracy, reading fluency (words correct per minute), and comprehension (adapted from international literacy assessments)

Classroom observations: Structured observations using validated protocols documenting instructional practices, student engagement, and teacher-student interactions (8 observations per classroom)

Reading attitude surveys: Age-appropriate instruments measuring motivation, self-efficacy, and attitudes toward English reading (administered three times throughout the year).

Teacher interviews: Semi-structured interviews with classroom teachers exploring pedagogical decision-making and perceptions of student progress.

Student work samples: Collection and analysis of reading journals, comprehension worksheets, and oral reading recordings.

Data analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using statistical software (SPSS 26.0). Independent samples t-tests compared experimental and control groups on outcome measures, while repeated measures ANOVA examined growth trajectories within groups across the academic year. Effect sizes (Cohen's d) were calculated to determine practical significance of findings.

Qualitative data from observations and interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis procedures. Transcripts were coded iteratively to identify recurring themes related to effective pedagogical practices, psychological factors influencing learning, and implementation challenges. Cross-case analysis compared patterns across different classrooms and grade levels.

Ethical considerations. The research protocol received approval from the institutional ethics committee. Informed consent was obtained from school administrators, teachers, and parents. Participation was voluntary, and students could withdraw without penalty. Confidentiality was maintained through use of pseudonyms and secure data storage.

Results

Quantitative findings. Analysis of pre-test data confirmed no significant differences between experimental and control groups on any baseline measures, validating random assignment procedures. Post-test comparisons revealed substantial differences favoring the experimental group across multiple reading competencies.

Phonological awareness: Experimental group students demonstrated significantly higher phonological awareness scores ($M = 84.3$, $SD = 8.7$) compared to control group peers ($M = 71.2$, $SD = 11.4$), $t(118) = 7.23$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.32$. This large effect size indicates that integrated instruction substantially enhanced students' ability to manipulate sounds in English.

Decoding accuracy: Word reading accuracy improved dramatically in the experimental group ($M = 88.6\%$, $SD = 7.2\%$) versus the control group ($M = 74.3\%$, $SD = 9.8\%$), $t(118) = 9.45$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.73$. Students receiving systematic phonics instruction demonstrated superior ability to decode unfamiliar English words.

Reading fluency: Oral reading fluency, measured in words correct per minute (WCPM), showed marked differences. Experimental group students averaged 62.4 WCPM ($SD = 12.3$) compared to 43.7 WCPM ($SD = 10.6$) in the control group, $t(118) = 8.94$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.63$. This indicates that integrated approaches

facilitated development of automatic word recognition.

Reading comprehension: Comprehension scores revealed significant advantages for the experimental group ($M = 78.2\%$, $SD = 11.5\%$) over controls ($M = 64.8\%$, $SD = 13.7\%$), $t(118) = 5.87$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.07$. Students who received explicit comprehension strategy instruction demonstrated better understanding of texts.

Motivational outcomes: Reading attitude surveys revealed that experimental group students reported significantly higher intrinsic motivation ($M = 4.2$ on 5-point scale, $SD = 0.6$) compared to control students ($M = 3.4$, $SD = 0.8$), $t(118) = 6.34$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.16$. Self-efficacy beliefs also favored the experimental group, with students expressing greater confidence in their reading abilities.

Analysis of variance revealed interesting developmental patterns. Second-grade students in the experimental condition showed the largest gains in phonological awareness ($d = 1.58$), while fourth-graders demonstrated greatest improvements in comprehension ($d = 1.24$). These findings suggest that different components of reading instruction may have varying impact depending on developmental stage.

Qualitative findings. Classroom observations and teacher interviews yielded rich insights into implementation processes and contextual factors influencing outcomes.

Engagement and motivation: Experimental classrooms exhibited markedly higher student engagement. Observers noted that students in these settings displayed enthusiasm during reading activities, volunteered to participate, and persisted with challenging tasks. Teachers reported that providing choice in reading materials and incorporating collaborative activities substantially increased motivation.

One teacher reflected: "When students select books that interest them and read with partners, they become excited about reading. I see them discussing stories during break time, which never happened before."

Instructional clarity: Observations revealed that explicit instruction in experimental classrooms provided students with clear learning objectives and systematic skill-building sequences. Teachers effectively modeled strategies, provided guided practice opportunities, and offered specific feedback. In contrast, control group instruction often lacked transparency about learning goals and provided insufficient scaffolding.

Differentiation: Experimental group teachers more

frequently adapted instruction to meet individual needs, using assessment data to form flexible groupings and provide targeted interventions. This responsive teaching appeared crucial for accommodating the wide range of abilities typical in primary classrooms.

Challenges and Barriers: Despite positive outcomes, implementation challenges emerged. Teachers identified time constraints, large class sizes (averaging 28 students), limited resources (particularly authentic English texts appropriate for beginners), and insufficient training in evidence-based methodologies as obstacles. Several teachers expressed initial discomfort with student-centered activities, reflecting their own educational experiences in more teacher-directed environments.

Cross-Linguistic Considerations: An unexpected finding concerned the role of first language literacy. Teachers observed that students with stronger Uzbek reading skills generally acquired English reading competencies more rapidly. This suggests positive transfer effects between languages and highlights the importance of supporting concurrent L1 and L2 literacy development.

Informal conversations with students revealed their perceptions of the learning experience. Experimental group students frequently mentioned enjoying the variety of activities, feeling successful when they could read new words, and appreciating opportunities to read books about topics that interested them. Several students spontaneously mentioned increased confidence: "Before I was scared to read English, but now I can do it."

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that reading instruction grounded in psychological understanding of child development and evidence-based pedagogical practices yields substantially better outcomes than traditional approaches for primary school English learners. The findings carry significant implications for educational practice and policy.

The results support theoretical models emphasizing the multifaceted nature of reading competence. Effective instruction must address multiple components simultaneously rather than focusing narrowly on single skills. The substantial gains in phonological awareness and decoding accuracy validate cognitive theories highlighting these foundational processes, while comprehension improvements underscore the importance of meaning-focused instruction.

The study also illuminates the critical role of psychological factors, particularly motivation and self-efficacy, in reading development. Students who

perceive reading as meaningful and believe in their capabilities demonstrate greater engagement and achievement. These findings align with self-determination theory and highlight the need for instruction that satisfies psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The study was conducted in a specific cultural and linguistic context (Uzbek-speaking students in Tashkent), potentially limiting generalizability to other populations. The one-year timeframe, while substantial, does not permit examination of long-term outcomes. Future longitudinal research could investigate whether early advantages persist and influence subsequent academic achievement.

The research focused primarily on reading mechanics (decoding and fluency) and basic comprehension. Advanced reading competencies including critical literacy, inferential comprehension, and reading-writing connections deserve further investigation. Additionally, the study did not examine the role of home literacy environments, parental involvement, or out-of-school factors that likely influence reading development.

Future research should investigate optimal approaches for different linguistic contexts, particularly examining how cross-linguistic similarities and differences affect reading acquisition. Studies comparing different instructional sequences and determining appropriate timing for introducing various reading components would inform curriculum development. Research on technology-enhanced reading instruction could identify effective uses of digital tools in primary classrooms.

Reading proficiency in English opens doors to educational opportunity, global communication, and access to vast information resources. For primary school students beginning this literacy journey, the quality of instruction they receive has profound and lasting consequences. By grounding practice in psychological understanding of how children learn and pedagogical knowledge of what works, educators can ensure that all students develop the reading skills necessary for academic success and lifelong learning.

The integration of psychological and pedagogical perspectives is not merely a theoretical exercise but a practical imperative. Children are not miniature adults; their cognitive capabilities, motivational patterns, and learning needs differ substantially from older learners. Effective reading instruction honors these developmental realities while systematically building the complex competencies underlying skilled reading.

As educational systems worldwide recognize English proficiency as increasingly essential, ensuring high-

quality reading instruction in primary schools becomes a matter of educational equity. All children, regardless of background or initial proficiency, deserve access to evidence-based teaching that enables them to become confident, capable readers. This research contributes to that goal by identifying psychological and pedagogical foundations upon which effective practice can be built.

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