

**A CORRELATION ANALYSIS OF ESL LEARNERS' TEXTUAL
COMPREHENSION PERFORMANCE, HIGHER ORDER THINKING
SKILLS AND TYPE OF BACKGROUND SCHOOLING**

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ABSTRACT

It is a common perception among Pakistani people that the private schools in the country are more effective at teaching English language and critical thinking skills than the state-operated public schools. The consumer stakeholders generally prefer private schooling in Pakistan to public schooling. It is to lend young learners a solid English speaking and reading background that will assist these learners to assume in future an advantageous position as university students. Taking into account the aforementioned perception, this investigation aimed to analyze any significant correlation between the university level learners' background public/private schooling type and their skills in English reading comprehension and higher order thinking. The research setting was a well-known Pakistani university in the city of Lahore. The data were collected from 300 female and male university undergraduates using an IELTS-adapted reading comprehension test and Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (Form A). To analyze the data, Pearson's correlation analysis was performed on the participants' performance while they were divided into two groups based on the background schooling type. The findings showed a moderate-high degree of correlation between the participants' background schooling type and their (i) textual information processing ability and (ii) higher order thinking skills. A high degree of correlation loaded between reading comprehension performance and higher order thinking skills levels.

Keywords: Pakistani University Learners, Public/Private Schooling, ESL Reading Comprehension, Higher Order Thinking Skills, Correlation

INTRODUCTION

Two schooling streams, public and private, are operational side by side in Pakistan. The majority of Pakistan perceives private schooling in the state as a better option than public schooling, particularly in the case of English language teaching and learning

(Awan, 2011). This perception seems maintained also in the face of several possible challenges that may co-occur with choosing private schooling, such as enormous fee structure, distance and the relevant high-maintenance protocols. The widespread perception has also penetrated the choice of Pakistan's low-income families that are badly affected by a steep fall in per capita income from 2017 – 19 (Husain, 2020). Alderman, et.al., (2001) investigating the Pakistani low-income households' choice of schooling type, found that the private schools are chosen for children because of the consistent evidence of better mathematics and language achievement on the part of these schools. The majority of 'parents are responding to perceived inadequate public education by enrolling their children in private schools (Alderman et. al., 2001:1), in spite of the huge difference between income consumption levels of both the systems.

Mathematics and language achievement, highly demanded of the 21st century university learner, are interlinked with advanced cognitive computations and skills. Efficient textual interpretation is an indispensable component of language achievement, and associated with rich and effective instruction apart from aptitude. Likewise, English reading comprehension is an area of high significance in ESL contexts like Pakistan, and related with effective instruction that the majority in Pakistan perceives linked with the state's private schooling (Almani, Soomro & Abro, 2012). A few studies have indicated the difference in the learner performance based on the Pakistani public and private school instruction including English language teaching. Amjad and Mcleod (2014) conducted an investigation on public/private schooling in Pakistan. The findings showed that the private school learners outperformed public school learners even when the variables of household, child and school were taken into account. Härmä (2015) overviewed private schooling and development, and concluded that for a long time, private schooling was perceived to be serving the state elite. On a similar note, Haider (2017) argues that certain schools in Pakistan, in the case of English language, are serving the elite. This seems true but numerous low-fee private school students have also outperformed their public schools' counter parts in cognitive and life skills (ASER, 2014; Arif & Saqib, 2003; Andrabi & Das, 2002; Alderman et.al., 2001).

Talking about the public-private schooling bifurcation in Pakistan, the formation of public perception, inclining towards private

schooling, builds on several perception-forming factors. Nariswariatmojo (2011) contended that several external and internal factors, affecting both the process and product, are involved in the prospect of English language learning in ESL contexts. While analyzing the context of Indonesia in connection with English language teaching and learning, Nariswariatmojo found that family background, school type and social elements work together to create impressions, perceptions and actions. Pakistan has also been under the British rule, and thus has imbibed a peculiar perception related to the status of English language. Therefore, English language in Pakistan is considered not only a need but also a matter of prestige (Abbas, 1993; Abbas & Iqbal, 2018; Shamim, 2008). However, like Indonesia, the similar aforementioned factors may have been involved in creating the present public perception in Pakistan, of choosing the private schools over public schools for second language and critical skills teaching. A short discussion of these factors here is expected to enhance the overall understanding of this perception. The strongest factor is that Pakistani private schooling is perceived as a better planning agent than public schooling in the area of teaching English (Awan & Zia, 2015).

Another significant factor may be called a bifurcation within bifurcation, thus doubly, though negatively, affecting English language learning. This particular division is related to the teaching of English, comprehension and higher order cognitive skills to the female population. To elaborate, in less developed/rural areas of Pakistan, education of female school goers is frequently compromised (Alderman, 1995). Such areas usually have public schools in their locality while a very few private schools may be spotted. This is because most of the private schools not only adhere to an English teaching methodology different from the public schools but also, do not lend themselves much to gender bifurcation. However, many instances related to compromised education of female school goers may be witnessed in private schools yet their occurrence rate is lower than that of the public schools. This connects to another important factor. The monetary scheme of the majority of the households in the less developed areas in Pakistan is such that female family members customarily are perceived and put one-step behind the male family members. This results into considering the schooling of male children more important than that of female counterparts (Salik & Zhiyong, 2014). Now, that the society is undergoing transition, a new yet strong

public perception has emerged. It is manifesting in the shape of people choosing private schooling, not only for better English language instruction but also for the critical and English comprehension skills development in their female children. It is because the customary bifurcation is less fortified in Pakistani private schools than public schools (Khan & Raza, 2011).

Harlec-Jones, Baig and Sajid (2005) investigated the rapid expansion of the private schools in the North of Pakistan during the decade of 1993 - 2003. The Northern Province of Pakistan is considered a less developed area than the two other big provinces in Pakistan namely the Punjab and Sindh. The researchers, by conducting a survey, found that even the households with low income wanted to choose private schooling for their children instead of the public schooling available in their area. This perception and choice were related to the anticipation that the private schooling would raise the learners with effective skills in English reading comprehension, speaking and higher order thinking. This was further linked with the pragmatic expectation that private English medium schools would make these children more successful as university learners in future than the children attending the government schools.

Discussing the trends, issues and challenges in English language reading comprehension, speaking and higher order cognitive skills, Shamim (2011) argued that Pakistani public and private schooling are characteristically distinguishable based on the quality of English language instruction. Furthermore, Shamim (2008) states that, in spite of waging efforts to introduce a uniform curriculum, the state-owned schools usually use Urdu language as the medium of instruction. As the public considers English language learning a key to success in the 21st century, they wage efforts to access private schools for educating their children. This indicates that the public perception has, at its back, the consideration for 21st century trends of learning the global language effectively; the anticipation that private schooling will cater to the English language learning needs of the children, and the desire to make their children proficient at higher order thinking skills. Somehow, such perception seems linked with the expectation of monetary relief in the households with low income, and prestige to the households with high income.

Taking into account the aforementioned public perception, this investigation's core concern was to analyze if there was any significant

correlation between the participants' proficiency levels in English reading ability and higher order thinking skills and their background schooling type in Pakistan. The study intended to answer the following research questions:

- i) Is there any significant correlation between the participants' English reading comprehension performance and the type of background schooling?
- ii) Is there any significant correlation between the participants' HOT skills and the type of background schooling?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants: The participants of this study were enrolled in the baccalaureate program in English language and communication in a well-known Pakistani university. These students came equipped with two types of background schooling in Pakistan i.e., public and private. A total of 300 female and male participants were purposively selected and divided into two groups based on the background schooling type, which was either public or private. They had enrolled in the subject of academic English reading comprehension, a part of which required them to complete assignments applying higher order thinking skills in reading. In this way, these learners were already well-introduced to English comprehension activities.

Instruments: This study used two instruments to collect its data. The first was an English reading comprehension test, adapted from IELTS reading tests. IELTS was chosen because the participants were L2 users of English. This test consisted of a reading text and a pool of 40 MCQs. The reading passage was modulated to the standard undergraduate reading level using Flesch Kincaid readability score. The readability score was achieved applying Flesch Kincaid readability test, which indicates the readability level of a reading text in English (Si & Callan, 2001). The participants were allotted 1 hour and 30 minutes for solving the reading comprehension test, the time that the participants' university follows for giving reading comprehension assessments. This test was administered to the participants to measure their English reading comprehension performance.

The second instrument administered to the participants was Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal (Form-A). This Appraisal is a test used to measure learners' higher order thinking skills. It was a

pool of 86 questions to be responded within 60 minutes that is the standard time allotted to solve the Appraisal. The critical thinking skills, targeted in the Appraisal, were *argument analysis, assumption, deduction, inferencing and information interpretation*. The validity of WGCTA is established in terms of its internal consistency, the scores stability over an interval, and scores correlation in alternate forms. Applying the Spearman-Brown formula and using split-half reliability coefficients, the test's internal consistency was measured. The same group administration with an interval, showed an acceptable level of 0.73. Moreover, the test is known as valid in its face, content, criterion and construction (Hajjarian, 2008).

FINDINGS

To find out the answers of the research questions, Pearson's correlation analysis was performed using SPSS V. 26. By far, it is the most common method to find out the magnitude of association between variables (Nettleton, 2014). Table 1 shows the correlation coefficient between the participants' reading comprehension performance and HOT skills:

TABLE-1
CORRELATION BETWEEN THE PARTICIPANTS'
READING COMPREHENSION AND HOT SKILLS

	HOT Skills	
Reading Comprehension	Pearson's Coefficient	.791
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	300

Table 1 shows Pearson's coefficient for the correlation between the participants' current reading comprehension performance and HOT skills. The obtained value is .791. That lies between the standard for *high* degree relationship i.e., ± 0.50 and ± 1 . According to the results, there is a high degree of correlation between the participants' advanced critical thinking skills or HOT skills and reading comprehension performance.

Table 2 shows the correlation between the participants' reading comprehension ability and the type of their background schooling:

TABLE-2
CORRELATION BETWEEN THE PARTICIPANTS' READING
COMPREHENSION AND SCHOOLING TYPE

Schooling			
		<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>
Reading Comprehension	Pearson's Correlation	.597	.621
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000
	N	121	179

Table-2 shows that the correlation values between the participants' reading comprehension and their background public and private schooling are .597 and .621 respectively. Both values, being greater than ± 0.50 , reflect a *moderate-high* degree of correlation.

Table-3 shows the correlation between the participants' HOT skills and the type of their background schooling:

TABLE 3
CORRELATION BETWEEN THE PARTICIPANTS' HOT SKILLS
AND SCHOOLING TYPE

Schooling			
		<i>Public</i>	<i>Private</i>
HOT Skills	Pearson's Correlation	.504	.619
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000
	N	121	179

According to Table 3, the correlation values between the participants' HOT skills and their background public and private schooling are .504 and .619 respectively. Both values, greater than ± 0.50 , show a *moderate-high* degree of correlation between these factors.

DISCUSSION

The background schooling type is one of the several mediating factors affecting the learner performance at university level in Pakistan. This study started with the Pakistani public's generally observable and dichotomous perception that private schooling caters to the learners needs of English language, reading comprehension and HOT skills better than the state-operated public schooling. Based on this perception, the public frequently chooses private schools over public schools for their children. The private schools are considered better agents of action in English curriculum planning and higher order thinking development. Another significant element of the public perception is that it sees the English language learning and development highly linked with the syllabuses of the private schools. It is perceived as a facility, which can assist children in becoming better university learners in future. Although a great deal in learning quality depends on the curriculum of a second language and its processual materialization (Aziz, 2019), yet several interconnected factors may be involved in processing such perceptions. The current investigation, however, was interested in finding if there was some concrete evidence regarding the difference in the university learners' performance based on their background schooling type. For that matter, it took into consideration the areas of English reading comprehension and HOT skills a Pakistani university's undergraduates.

The findings of this study showed a *high* correlation between (i) ESL reading comprehension and HOT skills levels of the university undergraduates, and *moderate-high* correlation between (ii) the background schooling type and ESL reading comprehension performance among the university level undergraduates, and (iii) the background schooling type and HOT skills levels among the university level undergraduates. Currently, English is Pakistan's official and second language. It is undoubtedly a pressing learning need at all educational levels due to its global impact and retaining a large stock of knowledge. Brookhart (2010) states that effective L2 comprehension performance in a learner is linked with an effective arrangement of higher order thinking skills in the learner's cognitive dimension. This indicates that there is a strong connection between second language reading comprehension and HOT skills. The findings of the current investigation appear to validate Brookhart's opinion as

the participants of the current study show a significant correlation between their English reading comprehension performance and HOT skills. Furthermore, the participants who were schooled in these learning areas in private institutions performed better than those who were schooled in these areas in public institutions. This seems to indicate that the public perception regarding the private schooling in Pakistan is relevant to a good extent in the case of the participants.

The correlations in Table 2 and Table 3 show that the participants' schooling type difference has influenced their reading ability in English and HOT skills. A few contextualized studies such as Amir and Kang (2018), and Hashmi and Bradley (2018) elaborate this mediating factor. These studies showed that Pakistani private school children outperformed their public-school counterparts while taking into account the potential intervening variables of aptitude, personality and learning environment. The current correlations also show that Pakistan's private schooling loaded a higher positive value regarding the reading comprehension and HOT skills, than that of the public schooling. This indicates that the public opinion about the schooling type is statistically confirmed at a *medium-high* level. Moreover, the private schools seem to perform better in their HOT skills teaching approach in the area of reading comprehension. Here, we are assuming that causation cannot be established on correlational confirmations. Therefore, it may be beneficial to further this short investigation on quality and facilities issues facing state-operated public schools, and trace a reliable causality behind such correlations.

The public perception working behind the preference of private schools to public schools not only indicates 21st century trends and desires in English language learning in Pakistani public but also certain issues related with it. We intend to discuss these issues in short here in order to indicate the need of furthering research in connection with the private and public schools' performance in English teaching.

The common perception here reaffirms a close link between English as a global need for communication and individual development. University students equipped with better communication and cognitive skills are frequently seen to invite more employability in the market than the individuals who possess less effective English language and cognitive skills. In other words, English language is seen as a tool of development at international, national and individual level. Therefore, if the current public-private bifurcation in Pakistan is

allowed to perpetuate without significant and suitable reforms in English language teaching, two fairly divided learner communities are expected to emerge with largely conflicting interests at several levels. To avoid such a situation, there is a need of equality in catering to the needs of the learners in Pakistani schools. This further indicates the need of creating an English curriculum which is uniform, and equipped along the modern content and methodologies. It is a matter of concern that certain movements, which encourage the public into thinking about English as a language of prejudice without taking into consideration its current global role in national and individual success, are allowed to penetrate public opinion without any check. This state of affairs frequently disrupts the progress in reforming the English curricula, teaching methodology and assessment methods.

Connected with the issue of public-private schooling bifurcation in Pakistan, is the issue need of gauging the capacity of English language teaching in public schooling (Shamim, 2011). As long as certain underlying problems related with appropriate qualification of teachers, school facilities, technology enhancement will persist, imparting effective English language teaching may continue to be a difficult target to achieve. Unequal inputs will keep yielding unequal outputs. The condition of public schools in terms of quality of education, facilities and general training seem to have badly affected the learning environment of these spaces leading the public to opt for private schools for their children. Another concern are the mushroom private schools, which do nothing more than what public schools do for their consumers. However, the common perception about the condition of the public schools leads the public to choose private schools over the public institutions. In order to dissipate the learners' and other stakeholders' demotivation in learning, due to such circumstances, there is a great need to introduce a uniform English language syllabus designed on modern lines; provide appropriate facilities in all schools, and a design a potent policy of strategically planning and organizing resources for English language teaching equally for all social strata.

CONCLUSION

In Pakistan, there exists a common perception that the private schooling is more effective than state-operated public schooling particularly in the case of English and critical thinking skills teaching

and learning. We see that this perception generally leads the consumer stakeholders' choice because of the anticipated prospective success of the learners on becoming university students. This paper reported the findings on the correlation between the Pakistani university undergraduates' background schooling type, and both their reading and critical thinking abilities. This investigation's findings indicate that the participants who acquired Pakistani private schooling are better at English reading comprehension and HOT skills than the participants who received Pakistani public schooling. However, correlations may not always indicate causation. Therefore, the positive correlations also indicate a need to conduct more contextualized investigations to learn about the factors that influence the relevant learning in private and public schools. We recommend performing investigations into English language policy management, school facilitation strategy, discouraging linguistic movements about the need of the global language, and teaching capacity in both public and private schools. Such investigations can reveal important factors working at the back of the differences in the learner performance in both the aforementioned schooling type.

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