

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Reading Comprehension and Fluency Gaps among public Rural Primary Students: the Case of South Pemba region in Zanzibar

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Abstract

This study investigates the gaps in reading comprehension and fluency among rural primary students in the South Pemba region of Zanzibar. It examines students' performance in non-word reading and text comprehension, identifying the underlying causes of their difficulties and proposing potential solutions. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, the research involved cross-sectional quantitative surveys and qualitative observations. Approximately 100 students participated in a Non-Word Reading Test and a Comprehension Test, designed to evaluate their phonemic awareness, decoding skills, and comprehension abilities. Classroom observations provided insights into teaching practices and the learning environment. Statistical analyses were applied to the quantitative data, while thematic analysis was used for the qualitative data. The findings revealed significant deficiencies in reading skills, with poor fluency and comprehension levels among the students. Notably, 69% of learners could decode fewer than 15 non-words, and 92% of attempts were incorrect. The students struggled with reading comprehension, particularly in answering inferential questions, highlighting weaknesses in phonemic awareness and fluency development. The study emphasizes critical literacy deficits and suggests strategies, such as promoting explicit phonemic awareness and enhancing teacher education, to improve literacy outcomes. These insights can guide policymakers and educators in addressing literacy challenges in rural Zanzibar.

Keywords: Reading; comprehension; fluency; rural education

Introduction

It is well understood that reading comprehension and fluency are two important aspects of literacy that have a direct impact on students' academic achievement and further schooling prospects. Thus, fluency, meaning reading fast, appropriately, and accurately, lays a backdrop to comprehension, which is viewed as the capacity to understand content and do so with the right intonation (Rasinski, 2012). Without these skills, students experience difficulties in every subject, especially in lessons taught with the use of written texts. These skills are poorly developed in rural areas, especially in developing countries, because of several socio-economic, educational, and linguistic factors (Vally et al., 2024). Literacy development continues to be an area of concern in Zanzibar, particularly in Pemba, which is predominantly rural. Challenges include poor teaching facilities, inadequate learning resources, and a shortage of qualified teachers among rural primary learners (Ministry of Education and Vocational Training (MoEVT), 2024). Language barriers exacerbate these difficulties. For

example, children often transition between Kiswahili and English during school, which hinders their ability to read fluently and comprehend what they are reading (Lyons, 2017; MoEVT, 2024). Evaluations of literacy in rural African schools have recently been described as quite disturbing. For instance, SACMEQ studies indicate that rural students perform significantly below their urban counterparts in reading, as a result of the aforementioned challenges (Spaul & Taylor, 2015). Similarly, research conducted by Piper and Zuilkowski (2015) on reading instruction in Kenya and Tanzania reveals that rural students lag in reading fluency and comprehension due to limited access to reading materials and inadequate instructional support. Although there is existing literature on literacy development in rural African schools, focused research on reading fluency and comprehension difficulties specific to rural Zanzibar, especially Pemba, is lacking. National literacy has been identified as an area requiring improvement, with several reports highlighting the issue (MoEVT, 2024). However, there is limited data on the actual deficit of basic reading skills in rural schools in Zanzibar.

This study, therefore, aims to establish a case study of five rural primary schools in South Pemba, namely Ziwani, Tumbi, Kilindi, Dodo, and Kangani. Targeting two important indicators word reading (decoding non-words) and reading comprehension (reading passages) the study seeks to identify specific difficulties students face. The goal is to develop more effective interventions while filling a knowledge gap on how educational contexts in Zanzibar specifically influence literacy achievements. This research will inform policy and education stakeholders in designing and implementing interventions to address these gaps and enhance literacy skills.

Literature Review

The ability to read for meaning and at a reasonable speed is one of the key emergent literacy skills especially in early years learning. Another variable is reading effectively and this is defined by the capacity to both decode and understand the written texts which is predictive of students' success in all the subjects of learning (Grabe, 2009). However, the current performance review shows that there are major inequality differences in literacy outcomes between urban and rural students, where the latter suffers major deprivations because of scarce resources, untrained teachers and other social economic vices (UNESCO, 2020). This literature review looks into the trends in reading comprehension and fluency emphatically and globally as well as in Zanzibar's public primary learning institutions specifically.

Reading Comprehension and Fluency

Comprehension is the understanding or making a meaning out of what is read on the text (Snow, 2002). They use the student's knowledge of vocabulary, decoding ability, and fluency to comprehend the written word. On the other hand, reading fluency means the student's capacity to read the content of a text with appropriate speed, correct intonation and phrasing (National Reading Panel, 2000). In actuality, these two forms of reading are connected where... This is because poor fluency is known to hinder comprehension and result in low performance at school (Rasinski, 2012).

Literacy gaps: global and African context

Literacy problems can be observed all over the world, especially in the developing countries. The statistics provided by the World Bank (2019) showed that almost more than half, that is, 53% of students in the low and

middle-income countries are illiterate by the age of ten implying that they cannot read and comprehend a story. In sub-Saharan Africa, it is slightly higher than 80 percent to show that most children at the same age are learning disabled, especially in regard to basic reading skills (UNICEF, 2019). In most of the African countries and including Tanzania most students in the rural area have low literacy levels due to scarcity of educational resources, inadequate teachers and learners-teaching/learning materials (Oluoch, 2006). Piper et al. (2016) established from his study that students in rural areas in Kenya read slower and comprehend at a slower rate than students in urban areas, because of such structural factors. Likewise Uganda based studies reveal that rural student reads at a much lower level than their urban counterpart (Santander, 2014). Based on these results, it can be concluded that rural urban difference in literacy not only exists, but also is highly chronic.

Reading Challenges in Rural Tanzania

Tanzania like most other countries in Africa has had challenges in enhancing literacy levels especially in the rural areas. Research done indicates that despite the high enrolment to primary education and craze for education, literacy and learning outcomes remain relatively low (Komba and Nkumbi, 2008). Even in Zanzibar, a semi-Williams pp. 160 autonomous region of Tanzania the situation remains the same. Some of the issues affecting Zanzibar's rural schools include lack of training among teachers, over congested classes, and poor access to reading materials in schools especially in Pemba region; these are some of the main factors that lead to poor reading standards (Cameron and Dodd, 2020). A study done by TIE and ZMEVT revealed poor reading and comprehension skills among rural primary students in Tanzania especially in Zanzibar. The assessment revealed the fact that many students attending rural schools experience difficulties in attaining even minimum levels of literacy with a considerable portion of them failing to read at least at the intended level (ZMEVT, 2018). These findings are similar to a study done by Uwezo (2017) where they established that students in most Tanzanian rural of schools still find it difficult to read rather average comprehension passages that should ideally have been tender aged students.

Phonemic Awareness and Decoding Skills

Another important issue is that students do not learn the advantages of phonemic awareness and decoding meaningfully and able to read fluently and comprehend texts. Phonemic awareness is the capacity to identify and playing with the sounds that make up words, which enables one say the sounds of a new word (Adams, 1990). Decoding in turn refers to the capacity of students to use their understanding of correspondence between letters and sounds to read words (Ehri 2005). In a similar vein, Torgesen (2002) has pointed out that research confirms one's hypothesis that poor phonemic awareness and decoding affect reading fluency and comprehension. In the context of Zanzibar, Rubagumya (2010) discovered that phonemic awareness was a major factor that leads to reading poor performance because students did not comprehend the sounds of the words that are read. Among the recommendations that accompanied the study, the interventions that deliver early and strong phonics competencies have to be mentioned. This is in agreement with studies done in other regions of Tanzania, and studies show that students who have been taught using phonics techniques showed great improvement in their fluency and comprehension (Mtahabwa and Rao, 2010).

Socio-Economic and Cultural Barriers

Socio-economic and cultural factors of students also bring influences the development of reading abilities of the learners in the rural areas. I agree with Abadzi's ideas: poverty, poor access to quality education and insufficient availability of home reading stock cause literacy differences in rural areas. Also, in many areas of Zanzibar, particularly in the rural areas, the medium of instruction more often than not in the first three years of schooling is Kiswahili, which may not be the first language at home, therefore; the acquisition of literacy skills is a major challenge (Brock-Utne, 2012). Research has also suggested that students from lower SES status families are at higher risks of suffering from reading issues. Malmberg and Sumra in a study carried out in Tanzanian rural school discovered that students in less fortunate households recorded poor performances in reading than those students from well-endowed homes. This is attributable, in part, to the fact that the children have little access to books and other written material in the home. Teacher learning has also been found to be a significant mediator of learning the outcomes to read. Studies show that the methods used by the tutors to teach have a large influence on the students' facility in reading and their understanding of the text (Snow, Burns, and Griffin, 1998). Nevertheless, available research shows that many teachers in rural schools on the other are not qualified to impart FL reading properly (Moshia, 2012). Hardman et al. (2012) indicated that Tanzanian students are taught by teachers who do not encourage critical thinking and many of them still use the 'chalk and talk' technique, especially those in rural areas, with very little emphasis being placed to the teaching of fluency, phonemic awareness, and comprehension.

In an attempt to enhance the outcomes of reading in rural school a call has been made for supporting and professional development of teachers. For instance, Tanzania's "Literacy and Numeracy Support" (LANES) has targeted the way of reading through equipping the teachers with right tools and resources as well as training them on how to teach phonics as well as reading comprehensions more effectively as per the current reforms and innovations as provided by USAID (2019). Evidence from the literature reveals several challenges affecting the rural students especially those in sub-Saharan Africa, in their quest for the mastery of reading comprehension. These difficulties are compounded by relatively low phonemic awareness, poor training of teachers and other facets of socio e economics of schooling in the rural Zanzibar primary schools. To deal with these challenges, there must be some effective strategies that should involve remedial teaching to address poor literacy, development of good specific teacher training to enhance and develop the fundamental and socio-economic support for improvement of students in rural areas. If such measures are not put in place then the existing reading deprivation between the rural and urban learners will continue with severe drawbacks on education for the rural children.

Methodology

Data Collection Methods

The study on "Reading Comprehension and Fluency Gaps among Public Rural Primary Students: the Case of South Pemba region in Zanzibar. Both qualitative and qualitative research methods were employed so as to be able to get the broader perspective of the students' reading difficulties with additional observations done in classroom settings. Five rural public primary schools were selected and 100 students were sampled randomly so as to represent the total population of the students in the selected five schools with purposeful sampling to capture the rural education environment of Zanzibar. First, pre and post tests in reading were administered to

know the students' frequency and comprehension levels. These assessments consisted of two main sections; a Non-Word Reading Test and a Comprehension Test. Non-word test, in this test student were required to pronounce as many non-words as they could in one minute. In this test, I wanted to find out how their phonemic awareness and decoding skills are since they are crucial for reading rates. In comprehension test, passages were administered to the students and these were accompanied by literal and inferential questions. The number of words they could read in 60 seconds? This was done with the aim of recording their fluency as well their performances in responding to questions asked. This approach facilitated the generation of quantitative information on student's capacity to decode words/ text and general reading proficiency.

Also, ten denotential teaching practices and reading behaviors were videotaped and observed in a natural context through classroom observation that provide qualitative data for the study. Observed teaching and learning at five of the schools for a number of times how reading lessons are organized, the teaching approaches used and students' interaction during reading sessions. The observations recorded aspects like the quantity and quality of interactions that teachers had with students, phonics instruction and provision of free, choice reading. Including these elements helped the study acquire the necessary background to analyze the quantitative data and on the possible instructional deficiencies leading to the problems of reading that students experience.

Data Analysis Techniques

In the study "Reading Comprehension and Fluency Gaps among Public Rural Primary Students: the Case of South Pemba region in Zanzibar. The research involved the use of data collection and analysis both in quantitative and qualitative ways to exhaustively evaluate the performance of students in their reading classes.

Quantitative Analysis: Survey and standardized assessment data were analyzed quantitatively and inform of frequency distribution using software such as SPSS or excel. Aptitude measures were incorporated such that descriptive statistics were used to present key measures such as students' reading fluency and comprehension performance. The purpose of this approach was to describe reading competencies in the sample of students. Descriptive statistics were subsequently followed by inferential statistics so as to determine significant differences or even relationships present in various variables such as socio-economic factors and reading performance. Such tests enabled the establishment of factors that may affect the students' ability to read and also recognized weaknesses. **Qualitative Analysis:** Observational data which are the qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis. In this process, the data was coded in order to seal patterns and themes that are connected to barriers to literacy, the impact of teaching and learning environment. Applying thematic analysis allowed revealing the context of students' reading as well as how various aspects of educational process influenced the literacy.

Results and Discussion

Cross sectional survey was carried out in five rural public primary schools in south pemba namely ziwani, Tumbi, Kilindi, Dodo, and Kangani. It tends to show how students experience a lot of difficulties in reading on fluency and comprehension levels. Self-generated questions were used to examine students' decoding of non-words and their reading comprehension in the framework of a 60-second timeframe. By implication this outcomes indicate that there are systematic reading deficiencies that need to be addressed.

Non-Word Reading Attempts

According to the results, the majority of analyzed students could hardly decode non-words, which points to their phonics' level. Decoding is a component of the sight word and means the conversion of the written lexemes into corresponding sound patterns that help the reader to distinguish between the words and comprehend the text (Ehri, 2005). Concretely, 69% of the students tried less than 15 non-words showing inefficient decoding skills in this survey. This is in line with prior studies done to find that phonics intervention especially for young readers is effective in enhancing their decoding abilities (National Reading Panel, 2000). The small number of students that tried 36-46 non-words signifies that there are few strong readers here and there, and the majority of the students are poor readers. Due to the restricted number of tries possible, it dwells more emphasis on the skills necessary for foundational decoding and hence one more associated proof that special help should be given in the advancement of these skills. The other difficult task analyzed concerned accuracy in reading non-words. Majority of the students including the ones who tried to read the non-words failed. This means that 63 students could only identify 6 non-words correctly on average: this is consistent with the finding of pervasive phonics rule application difficulty. Decoding itself may entail 2 sound symbol relationships: Phonemic awareness, which is the capability to hear/identify/ manipulate individual phonemes, has been postulated to bear a direct relationship with decoding (Adams, 1990). The dramatic loss of accuracy while the frequency of non-words was rising indicates that the students do not have confidence or automaticity in decoding and as a consequence they cannot read fluently. This is a missing link in phonemic awareness may be due to lack of adequate instructional in initial developmental stages of reading. Ultimately, an overwhelming proportion of students (92 out of 100) read the non-words incorrectly; this highlights a dearth in phonemic awareness among our student population. In Gilon (2004) phonemic awareness is the most important skill that learners should acquire in early years to read and it help them break, segment sounds of words into smaller units which can be blended together. This prevalence of inaccurate non-word reading suggests students have not been practiced enough in the key skill behind phonological awareness – the act of retrieving and writing grapheme choices from memory.

Reading Comprehension tries

Students' reading of the text resembled their decoding performance with non-words. Many students had great difficulty achieving an understanding of the decoded words and sentences which is a higher order skill than simply being able to decode. Nevertheless, the few students who did attempt more than 26 comprehension words during their set assessment time demonstrate just how far reaching of an issue reading fluency is. Reading comprehension, according to the Simple View of Reading, is multiply determined by decoding and language comprehension (Gough and Tunmer, 1986). Survey data also demonstrate that students lacking basic decoding skills have difficulty in reading fluently, which interfere with their ability to make meaning from text. The accuracy of reading comprehension words followed a similar pattern to non-word decoding, with a large percentage of students only able to read a limited number of words correctly. This pattern suggests that students are not just having trouble decoding words, but are also unable to read accurately enough to support understanding. According to Rasinski (2004), reading fluency comprising accuracy, speed, and expression plays a critical role in comprehension, as fluent readers can focus on understanding rather than word recognition. Again, this is only reading comprehension words, and the limited precision only strengthens the case for fluency-based interventions. The fact that 93 students misread words in a reading comprehension passage is

another example of the trend that poor reading foundation skills also limit the development of reading non-words. That means students have trouble differentiating good and bad word recognition, and without that they cannot possibly understand what a passage means. Such deficits suggest a gap in explicit phonics and vocabulary instruction, both of which are necessary for improving students' overall reading comprehension (Snow, Burns, Griffin, 1998).

Comprehension Question Responses

The survey results also revealed substantial weaknesses in students' ability to answer comprehension questions, especially those that required more thoughtful or inferential understanding of the text. While basic factual questions received correct answers from a slight majority of students, the number of correct responses dropped significantly as the questions required deeper understanding. This finding is in line with the research that suggests that students with weak decoding and fluency skills are unable to do as much higher-order comprehension tasks (Perfetti, Landi, Oakhill, 2005). And the poor performance on the inferential questions definitely shows a need for some new instructional methods to help foster real reading comprehension (i. e. how to infer, predict, and summarize important information. To sum it all up the baseline survey shows that the five rural public schools in South Pemba have severed literacy problems. Because if the decoding is so terribly difficult and if the comprehension is so terribly difficult to most students, then there has got to be some serious flaws in the basic reading instruction. These problems can be overcome by phonemic awareness and phonics instruction, which are the most important strategies for improving reading fluency and comprehension. Without these interventions, students are likely to continue struggling with reading, limiting their academic progress and future opportunities. The accuracy of reading comprehension words followed a similar pattern to non-word decoding, with a large percentage of students only able to read a limited number of words correctly. This downward progression shows that students aren't just having trouble decoding words, but they are also unable to read accurately enough to even support comprehension. According to Rasinski (2004), reading fluency comprising accuracy, speed, and expression plays a critical role in comprehension, as fluent readers can focus on understanding rather than word recognition. That and the fact that reading comprehension words are only partially accurate make the fluency-based interventions all the more necessary.

There are 93 students that misread words during reading comprehension and this shows the same pattern as non word reading errors, meaning that poor basic reading abilities hinder later development. Those students have trouble differentiating between good and bad word recognition, which is a necessary part in deriving meaning from text. These types of deficits indicate a lack of direct phonics and vocabulary training, which is essential for enhancing reading comprehension in students as a whole (Snow, Burns, Griffin, 1998).

Deficiencies in Comprehension Question Responses

The results from the survey also showed some major deficiencies in the students' ability to answer even some of the most basic comprehension questions, particularly those that required some degree of thoughtful or inferential reading of the passage. While basic factual questions received correct answers from a slight majority of students, the number of correct responses dropped significantly as the questions required deeper understanding. That fits with the research that says that students with weak decoding and fluency skills cannot as fully participate in higher-order comprehension tasks (perfetti, landi, oakhill, 2005). The poor success rate on

inferential questions alone should indicate a pressing need for some instructional strategies that will promote more meaningful reading comprehension, such as how to infer, predict, and summarize important information. The initial survey shows severe illiteracy problems among the five rural public schools in South Pemba. Because there is such an overwhelming difficulty in decoding and comprehension in most of the students it seems that there are some serious deficiencies in the basic reading instruction. The schools need to make some changes, namely more phonemic awareness, phonics-based instruction, fluency strategies, and comprehension strategies. If these interventions didn't exist then many students would still have problems with reading and thus would not excel in school and therefore would not have as many opportunities in the future.

Conclusion

The baseline survey results from the five rural public primary schools in South Pemba which are Ziwani, Tumbi, Kilindi, Dodo, and Kangani revealed significant challenges in students' reading fluency and comprehension. Most of the students showed poor decoding abilities, especially with the nonwords, and poor reading comp. Most could not even try or did not correctly read enough pseudo words or comprehension related words, which points to a serious lack in the building blocks of literacy. Furthermore, the students' performance on comprehension questions showed that while they could answer basic factual questions, they had difficulty with inferential questions requiring deeper understanding. These results highlight the dire need for focused literacy programs that will enhance the students' phonemic awareness, phonics abilities, reading fluency, and overall comprehension. Based on the findings of this study, here are some recommendations for improving Reading Comprehension and Fluency Gaps among public Rural Primary Students in South Pemba region. Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Instruction: Schools need to adopt phonemic awareness and phonics-based reading curriculum. These programs would train the students in decoding words including non-words, which should in turn enhance their general reading fluency. Phonemic awareness is the base to reading, and without this base, students will never overcome their lack of accuracy and fluency. Fluency Development Programs: Implement some sort of structured reading fluency interventions, like repeated reading activities and fluency focused drills. That way, the students would be able to read faster and more accurately, which would allow them to take in words more quickly, which would in turn lead to better overall comprehension. Teachers should utilize guided oral reading to develop fluency.

Comprehension Strategies: Schools need to teach strategies for reading comprehension like predicting, summarizing, and making inferences in order to improve reading comprehension. These are the sort of strategies that will allow students to become more involved in the text and better able to answer inferential questions. Teacher Training: And then they wonder why teachers don't know how to teach phonics, and reading fluency, and comprehension, well duh, because they don't provide us with the proper training workshops for this profession. All training should be data-driven, and teachers should be able to evaluate and remediate each student reading deficits. Use of Diagnostic Assessments: Continuous diagnostic reading assessments to track students' progress and find those who are at risk for reading problems as early as possible. These evaluations can lead to tailored interventions and make sure that students get the focused support they need in order to be successful. Parent and Community Involvement: Involve the parents and the community in the children's literacy growth. Encouraging reading at home and involving parents in literacy-related activities can reinforce learning and promote a culture of reading beyond the classroom.

Declaration

I, Saleh Mussa Alawi, declare that this research is original, independently conducted, and adheres to ethical standards.

Acknowledgment: Grateful to all contributor's students, teachers, Teach United, Ministry, parents, administrators, mentors, and family for supporting reading comprehension study success. Your contributions were invaluable.

Funding: This research, supported by Teach United, analyzed reading gaps among 100 students in South Pemba, identifying decoding issues and fluency variations.

Conflict of interest: No conflict of interest declared; study conducted independently to enhance rural Zanzibar's reading literacy, ensuring integrity, objectivity, and professionalism.

Ethics approval/declaration: The study on reading gaps in rural Zanzibar followed ethical standards, ensuring informed consent and confidentiality to address literacy challenges.

Consent to participate: I agree to participate in the study by Saleh Mussa Alawi on reading comprehension and fluency among rural primary students.

Consent for publication: I, Saleh Mussa Alawi authorizes publishing research on rural South Pemba literacy gaps, analyzing causes and proposing solutions for educators and policymakers.

Data availability: The study analyzes reading gaps in South Pemba using quantitative assessment scores and qualitative observations, with raw data available upon request.

Author's contribution: The author independently conducted the research, analyzing reading proficiency challenges and recommending phonics programs and teacher training to enhance rural Zanzibar's education.

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