




Evaluating oral reading fluency in English as a Second Language: A quantitative analysis




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Background: There is a dearth of research on second language oral reading fluency (ORF) globally, particularly in Pakistan, both in theory and practice. No ORF scores are reported in any schools in Pakistan.

Objective: Hence, a quantitative study was conducted to calculate the ORF rates using the words correct per minute (WCPM) measure among Grade 7 English as a Second Language (ESL) learners.

Method: A 1-min reading test was administered to calculate the WCPM of Grade 7 ESL learners, randomly selected from a girls' public school in Sheikhpura, Punjab.

Results: The expected ORF benchmark for ESL learners in Grade 7 is approximately 97–112 WCPM, based on general estimates that ESL learners typically read about 25 WCPM less than their native-speaking peers. This benchmark is used here as a comparative guideline in the absence of officially reported ORF norms for Pakistani schools. In the present study, however, the average ORF rate found among Grade 7 ESL learners was notably lower, at 72 WCPM.

Conclusion: It was found that 90% of Grade 7 ESL learners fall within the 10th percentile compared to Grade 7 ORF norms. The situation regarding ORF among ESL learners in Pakistan is dire. Low ORF scores result from the lack of systematic reading practice in Pakistan's public schools.

Contribution: These data represent the first-ever calculated ORF scores for any grade in Pakistan. To improve the ORF profile of learners, a systematic reading intervention should be implemented in public schools in Pakistan.

Keywords: reading fluency; oral reading fluency norms; public schools; second language acquisition; reading skill.

Introduction

Developing reading skills is the main objective of English language teaching and learning in Pakistan (Imran et al., 2024). Both language education policy and practice have historically prioritised literacy skills, especially reading, as oral abilities are frequently acquired naturally by school age, whereas reading necessitates explicit and systematic training (Farukh, Ali & Shahid 2020; Sonbul, El-Dakhs & Masrai 2023; Zimmerman et al. 2019). Research shows that reading fluency leads to success in both elementary and secondary grades (Masrai et al. 2021; Ozfidan & Burlbaw 2019; Paige et al. 2012; Yildiz et al. 2019; Young & Ortlieb 2018). McKnight (2020) highlights that learners who struggle with reading in school tend to perform poorly in higher education. Moreover, Seguro (2019) and Yildiz et al. (2019) note that skills essential for reading are required at the school level, as they facilitate comprehension of other school subjects, such as science and mathematics.

According to the Pakistan National Education Policy 2009, only 72% of Pakistani students pass the primary level. The National Education Policy 2017 acknowledges that 'the quality of education at the primary level is unsatisfactory'. Only about 40% of children possess the minimum required competency in Languages, Mathematics, and Science (Imran & Ain 2019; Younas et al. 2019). Zimmerman et al. (2019) claim that reading is not developed by incidental exposure; it must be taught explicitly by using proven instructional approaches. The current reading practices in public schools of Pakistan are reported by Dogar and Shah (2024). There is no 'only English' reading done in public schools of Punjab, where 'only English' refers to reading the text of an English textbook without translation. The lessons are read, by way of the round-robin technique alongside translation. Reading is a byproduct of translation exercises, as there is no specific focus

on developing reading skills in general, and developing fluency is not a particular objective.

Dogar and Shah (2024) recommend that reporting English second language (ESL) learners' oral reading fluency (ORF) scores would be the first step toward highlighting the importance of ORF for English language teaching (ELT) practitioners in Pakistan. Hence, this study aims to determine the ORF scores of Grade 7 ESL learners in a public school in Sheikhpura, Punjab. The study will examine the actual state of reading fluency among ESL learners in public schools. Pretorius and Spaul (2016) claim that low ORF scores suggest that no systematic reading is taught in schools, indicating little exposure and reading practice. Learners who do not master basic reading skills are destined to underachieve academically and likely disengage from texts and other literary activities. No systematic reading practice in public schools of Pakistan has been reported, which might lead to low ORF scores; only research can confirm.

However, in Pakistan, no statistics are available to comment on learners' reading fluency in public schools. The present study is limited to public schools only. With the role of fluency being established in overall school performance, reporting ORF scores is a norm, as it indicates that learners are falling behind in reading skills. Several types of research have been reported in the past decade in ESL and English first language (EFL) school contexts; however, there is no consensus on reporting at the school level as a norm. ESL ORF research is scarce, especially in developing nations. Recent studies (Elmaadaway, El-Naggar & Abouhashesh 2025; Mutema & Pretorius 2024) have examined traditional and technology-enhanced ORF creation methods to fill this gap. Mutema and Pretorius (2024) evaluated ORF accuracy, speed, and reading comprehension (RC) in Grade 3 and Grade 4 Zimbabwean students, finding low performance and minimal progression but high connections between ORF components and RC. Additionally, Elmaadaway et al. (2025) examined how Alexa, an artificial intelligence (AI) voice chatbot, may help fourth graders with ORF. The experimental group showed considerable improvements in reading fluency and comprehension, suggesting that AI technologies can help non-native speakers learn literacy. These studies show an increasing interest in traditional and creative ORF interventions for early-grade students in varied educational settings. Another study reported that there were no large-scale studies on ORF in South Africa, which led to large-scale studies being conducted that were linked with early grade reading studies (Taylor et al. 2017). However, the situation is even worse in Pakistan, as this research is the first to report ORF scores in Pakistan, albeit on a very small scale. No large-scale data have ever been collected regarding the ORF of school learners. Oral reading fluency norms are reported in words correct per minute (WCPM) and assessed through graded passages.

The research aims to present a snapshot of ORF scores of ESL learners in Pakistan and highlight the importance of fluency

as an essential component of reading. However, this is just a drop in the vast ocean, as a much larger study would be needed to comment upon the present status of learners' reading fluency in Pakistan. Fluency, as a component of reading competence, though acknowledged by the ELT world, has still not gained attention in Pakistan. All the methods and approaches aim towards reading comprehension and overlook the importance of fluency in the process. No statistical data are available at any level for the fluency variables of school learners. The present study aims to report the ORF scores of Grade 7 ESL learners in Pakistan and compare them with oral reading norms to reflect upon the English reading fluency of school students in Pakistan. It will not only highlight the neglected fluency skill but also highlight the inevitable role of fluency in reading competence and academic performance. ORF scores are calculated as WCPM. Hence, the study aims to find answers to the following questions:

- RQ1: What is the WCPM of Grade 7 ESL learners in Pakistan?
- RQ2: What is the difference between the WCPM of ESL learners in Pakistan and the first language ORF norms?

Reading fluency and oral reading fluency norms

The most important aspect of skilful reading is the speed and accuracy with which an individual reproduces a text into spoken English. According to Rasplika and Cummings (2023), ORF is the ability to read connected text quickly, accurately, and with expression. Fluent reading, defined as a bridge to comprehension, means that readers are well aware of the words, recognise them automatically, and take less time to decode the words; this leaves readers with more energy and time to extract meaning from the text (Rasinski 2010; Rasinski 2019).

According to the latest studies, fluency should be an essential part of the curriculum in Pakistan (Sultana, Muhammad & Khatoon 2024). Rasinski (2019) argues that comprehension should always be the primary goal of reading, but fluent reading is essential to derive meaning from the text easily. The correlation between reading fluency and reading comprehension is established (Clarke et al. 2017; Fitzpatrick 2020; Grabe & Stoller 2019; Kang & Shin 2019; Rupley et al. 2020; Uysal & Bilge 2018; Yildiz et al. 2019; Yockey 2020). Reading fluency plays a crucial role in enhancing comprehension, which is essential for effective learning. Reading fluency must be addressed thoroughly to help students overcome difficulties in reading comprehension. Johns and Berglund (2010) state that reading fluency is the ability to read with accuracy, speed, and expression. Earlier fluency was limited to decoding text into speech at a great speed, but the National Reading Panel report (Panel 2000) states that reading a text without comprehension is meaningless. Hence, fluency is not meaningless decoding of language but involves comprehension. Grabe and Stoller (2019) use the term 'fluent reading for comprehension' and

claim that fluent readers 'engage in automatic word recognition without thinking about it'.

Speed is the rate of reading, calculated in words per minute (WPM) or WCPM. 'A consensus exists among researchers that reading rate is a crucial factor in determining reading fluency at all levels' (Breznitz 2006:9). It has a strong correlation with reading comprehension as well since automaticity is linked with comprehension (Johns & Berglund 2010).

Accuracy means that students recognise most words with little attention. It is the ability to read words in the text correctly. There are often miscues in the reading of students, such as mispronouncing, omitting, or inserting words. It is considered that if a student misses more than 10% of the words in a text, that is, one in ten words, then the text is too difficult for instruction (Johns & Berglund 2010).

The present study only reports the speed and accuracy in the form of WCPM. Speed is measured in WPM, and the errors made are deducted from the total words read to calculate WCPM (Braun-Zukowski 2009).

The study employs the first language ORF norms by Johns and Berglund (2010) for WCPM. Previous research (Hasbrouck & Tindal 2016) has mostly used ORF norms by Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006); however, as the reading fluency graded tests from Johns and Berglund were employed for the study, their norms for comparison were also chosen as they are relatively new and based on a larger data set. Table 1 presents a comparison of the ORF norms by Hasbrouck and Tindal and Johns and Berglund for Grades 3–7, as the data collected in the research were also gathered in the fall (at the beginning of the school year).

A comparison reveals that there is not much difference between the ORF norms of the two. For fall, Grade 7 ORF norms are 176, 154, 127, 102, and 79 for the 90th, 75th, 50th, 25th, and 10th percentiles. The 'adequate' fluency range for a grade level is 10 words above the 50th percentile and 5 below the 50th percentile (Hasbrouck & Tindal 2006). Hence, learners reading below the adequate target indicate reading fluency deficiency, and such students need to be considered for reading fluency intervention. The adequate fluency range for Grade 7 ESL learners in Pakistan is 122–137 WCPM.

Any scores below this level would indicate fluency deficiency, and such learners need to be put in a reading fluency intervention programme.

Methodology

This quantitative analysis-based study measured the reading fluency scores of Grade 7 ESL learners in a public school. The study was conducted in a girls' public school in the district of Sheikhpura, selected by convenience. The school administration was contacted, and all research ethics were followed. The participants were assured anonymity, and the researchers personally conducted the test. There were five sections of Grade 7 in the school; two sections were randomly chosen for the study. The study's results were shared with the participants as requested.

Instrument

Several standardised tests are used to measure the fluency of the learners. Test of Word Reading Efficiency (TOWRE) and Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills (DIBELS) have been widely used in research (Braun-Zukowski 2009; Velchick 2019). Both have their pros and cons, discussed and reported in the research. These tests are not available for research purposes; hence, progress monitoring assessments designed by Johns and Berglund (2010), published in their book, were used in this study. These tests are allowed to be reproduced for non-commercial educational purposes. The book provides two types of texts for assessment: narrative text and informative text. Although both types of passages are still designed for the same grade, the authors claim that narrative passages are easier than informative passages (Johns & Berglund 2010). Considering second language learners in public schools in Pakistan, narrative passages were used in the study.

Determining grade-level passage

The text difficulty of grade-level passages by Johns and Berglund (2010) was determined by Fry's (1968, 1977) and Spache's (1953) readability formulas. However, a passage designed for Grade 7 native learners is not valid for Grade 7 ESL learners. The advice of two experts in ELT was sought to determine a grade-level passage valid for Grade 7 ESL Pakistani learners. It was decided that the readability score of the Grade 7 English textbook would be calculated, and the

TABLE 1: Comparison of oral reading fluency norms by Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006), and Johns and Berglund (2010).

Percentile	Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 5		Grade 6		Grade 7	
	<i>N</i> = 16 988	<i>N</i> = 29 832	<i>N</i> = 16 523	<i>N</i> = 29 609	<i>N</i> = 16 212	<i>N</i> = 28 510	<i>N</i> = 10 520	<i>N</i> = 18 923	<i>N</i> = 6428	<i>N</i> = 10 687
	Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006)	Johns and Berglund (2010)	Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006)	Johns and Berglund (2010)	Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006)	Johns and Berglund (2010)	Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006)	Johns and Berglund (2010)	Hasbrouck and Tindal (2006)	Johns and Berglund (2010)
Words correct per minute										
90	128	128	145	144	166	165	177	177	180	176
75	99	100	119	119	139	137	153	153	156	154
50	71	72	94	94	110	109	127	127	128	127
25	44	46	68	69	85	85	98	98	102	102
10	21	24	45	42	61	60	68	67	79	79

N, number of student scores.

TABLE 2: Readability scores of grade level passages.

Readability tests	Grade 4: Living in China	Grade 5: Paper route	Grade 6: Impressions of America	Grade 7: Imagination
Flesch reading formula	79.1	73.7	69.3	62.0
Gunning fog	7.8	9.2	9.2	9.9
Flesch-Kincaid grade level	4.9	5.9	5.9	7.4
Coleman-Liau index grade level	7.0	8.0	8.0	9.0
SMOG index grade level	5.8	6.8	6.8	7.4
Automated readability Index grade level	3.7	4.8	4.8	5.4
Linsear write formula grade level	5.4	6.2	6.2	6.2
Readability consensus grade level	5.0	6.0	6.0	7.0

SMOG, Simple Measure of Gobbledygook.

TABLE 3: Readability scores of Grade 7 English textbook (chapter-wise) by Punjab Textbook Board.

Readability tests	Ch 1	Ch 2	Ch 3	Ch 5	Ch 6	Ch 7	Ch 9	Ch 10	Ch 11	Ch 12	Ch 13
Flesch reading	70.1	77.2	62.4	80.2	49.2	74.2	67.2	58.4	98.3	77.5	64.4
Gunning fog	9.1	8.5	7.5	6.9	13.8	6.5	7.1	9.7	4.4	12.6	10.9
The Flesch-Kincaid	8.0	5.3	6.9	4.5	10.3	4.7	7.0	8.8	1.4	10.0	7.5
Coleman-Liau index	6.0	8.0	9.0	7.0	12.0	9.0	9.0	8.0	5.0	6.0	10.0
SMOG index	6.0	6.3	6.8	5.2	10.4	4.9	6.5	8.5	3.5	6.0	8.1
Automated readability index	6.4	5.3	4.4	3.7	10.7	3.2	6.3	7.1	-	-	7.1
Pre-school	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	0.2	-	-
College	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12.7	-
Linsear write formula	9.0	5.8	5.1	4.6	11.1	3.2	6.4	8.6	3.0	-	7.4
College	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	10.2	-
Readability consensus grade level	7.0	5.0	5.0	5.0	11.0	5.0	7.0	8.0	3.0	9.0	8.0

Note: A readability index score could not be determined for chapters 4 and 8 because they are each less than 200 words long and solely comprise poetry.

Ch, chapter; SMOG, Simple Measure of Gobbledygook.

passage whose readability score matched that of the Grade 7 textbook would be used as an instrument. Spaul (2015) used a similar approach in his study and matched the readability scores of textbooks with those of the graded passage. Similarly, Jeon (2012) matched the readability scores of oral reading tests and comprehension texts during research in Korea.

Readability scores

To maintain the same yardstick, the readability scores of both the textbook and grade-level passages were determined. Table 2 presents the readability indices of four grade-level passages, as determined through an online readability formula tester.¹

Table 3 shows that passage 4 has a readability consensus of Grade 5, whereas passages 5 and 6 both get a readability consensus of Grade 6, and passage 7 has a readability consensus of Grade 7. A readability index of the Grade 7 Punjab textbook board was measured chapter-wise. Table 3 shows the readability scores.

It can be observed that the average readability scores for all chapters in the Grade 7 Punjab Textbook Board English book vary. The variation is also drastic, ranging from as easy as Grade 3 to as difficult as Grade 11. Chapter 6 is an outlier among other texts, as its difficulty level is too high. Hence, while calculating the average, it was left out. The average text difficulty was calculated as the average of the remaining 10 lessons, which resulted in a value of 6.2. In the readability scores of grade-level passages, both Grade 5- and Grade 6-level passages receive Grade 6 average

scores. Considering the level of students in Pakistan, it was decided to use a Grade 5-level passage after consultation with experts in ELT and linguistics, as well as two public school English language teachers, to ensure validity. Therefore, the Grade 5 narrative passage (Johns & Berglund 2010:154–155) was administered to Grade 7. Wang (2011) reports that in Taiwan, her sample school was enrolled in a bilingual programme that aimed to enable students to reach the American Grade 3 level when they reached Grade 6; hence, for her research with Grade 5, she used passages for Grade 2. Since the context of Pakistan is close to that of Taiwan, the decision to use a Grade 5 passage for Grade 7 seems logical.

Participants and data collection

The research was conducted with Grade 7 students enrolled in a public school in the Sheikhpura district, Pakistan. The ages ranged from 13 to 15 years old, and all of them began learning English in school from Grade 1. It means they had been learning English literary skills for 6 years at the time of data collection. There was no demographic data available at the school regarding the social status of the parents of the enrolled children. The principal of the school claimed that more than 80% of the students belonged to the lower middle class, and their parents were labourers. It is essential to note that the labourers are predominantly illiterate and cannot read or write English. Parental involvement in school education is almost negligible.

The data collection lasted for two days. The students were called into a large hall for the test, and after the test, they were moved back to their class so that the rest of the participants would not be exposed to the test. Some instructions regarding the test and the purpose of the

¹The online readability formula tester is available at <https://readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php>.

research were shared in the beginning to make participants feel at ease. The consent of the participants to participate in the research project was also obtained. Each student was called for the test individually, where they sat in front of the examiner. They were shown the picture and the title of the reading passage for a minute and then asked to read for a minute. The miscues were marked alongside, and the number of words was counted. The researchers conducted the test. The following steps were taken to conduct the fluency test:

- One student was called in individually.
- The researchers explained that the number of words read in a minute would be counted.
- The researchers handed over a copy of the reading text to the student.
- One minute was given to look at the picture and the topic of the text.
- The researchers signalled the student to start reading and started a stopwatch.
- The researchers marked the miscues on the teacher's copy as the student read.
- The researchers stopped the student after 1 min and recorded the last word read.
- Researchers counted the total number of words read in 1 min and the errors made.
- The researchers documented the WCPM by subtracting the errors from the total number of words read.

Limitations

One of the key limitations of this study is the relatively small sample size. Such a small sample size may not be representative of a regional population. Hence, the results may also not be generalisable to other groups, such as individuals from different age ranges, educational backgrounds, or cultural contexts. Future research with a larger and more diverse sample could help confirm the findings and enhance their applicability.

The participants were selected from only one public school for girls. This means that the results may reflect the characteristics or abilities of this specific group rather than the general population. A more randomised sampling approach or inclusion of participants from different demographics could help mitigate this limitation.

The fluency reading test was conducted under controlled conditions; however, variations in the test environment could still affect participants' performance. For example, factors such as distractions, participant stress levels, or even differences in the test's administration could impact the results. Standardising the testing environment in future studies could reduce this source of variability.

There is a possibility of research bias in the administration or analysis of the fluency reading test. Although efforts were made to ensure objectivity, subjective factors, such as the interpretation of the results or inadvertent influence on participants' behaviour, could have impacted the outcomes.

Future research could incorporate double-blind procedures to minimise this risk.

Ethical considerations

All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration and its later amendments. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Department of Applied Linguistics at Government College University Faisalabad, Pakistan on 08 August 2024. The ethical clearance number is 40-24.

Ethical considerations in research involving tests are crucial to protect participants' rights and well-being. Researchers ensured fair recruitment, informed consent, confidentiality, and avoidance of harm to participants. Therefore, all participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, procedures, and potential risks before taking part. Clear and accessible language (Urdu) was used to explain how the fluency reading test would be conducted, what data would be collected, and how the results would be used. Participants were allowed to ask questions, and their participation was voluntary. Data collected during the fluency reading test were anonymised to ensure that individual identities were not traceable in the results or any published findings. In the case of a fluency reading test, care was taken to avoid undue stress or pressure on participants during the assessment. If any participant experienced discomfort or anxiety during the test, steps were taken to support them, such as offering breaks or allowing them to withdraw from the study without consequence. Moreover, the district education officer who allotted the school to collect data reviewed and approved the study. The school principal remained on board during data collection; hence, the study complied with legal and institutional requirements regarding human subject research.

Findings

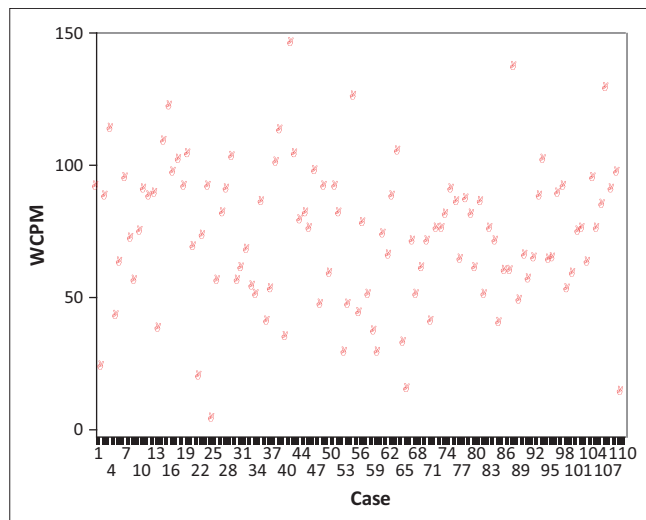
The test scores were analysed using IBM® SPSS® software, and descriptive statistics were calculated. The average reading speed and errors are shown in Table 4.

The table reports three variables: WCPM, speed, and errors. The average speed of the learners is 84 words per minute, with a minimum of 26 and a maximum of 149 words per minute. The average error rate reported is 12, which ranges from 0 to 88. The WCPM is 72 on average, with a range of 3 to 145. Such a huge variation indicates that the Grade 7 ESL learners were a mixed-ability group, ranging from learners in the decoding stage to those who read at a fairly good speed and with high accuracy.

The average of 12 errors indicates that the students did not focus on correcting the errors in their aim to read quickly. If there is one miscue in 10 words read, then the passage is supposed to be at a difficulty level appropriate for the learners (Johns & Berglund 2010). An average of 12 errors at 72 WCPM

TABLE 4: Descriptive statistics for reading fluency variables for Grade 7 English second language learners.

Reading fluency variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard deviation
Words correct per minute	3	145	72	26.650
Speed	26	149	84	22.572
Errors	0	88	12	11.148



WCPM, words correct per minute.

FIGURE 1: Scatter plot of Grade 7 English second language learners' words correct per minute.

is 17% ($12/72 \times 100$) error rate. Therefore, the passage was frustrating for most of the participants. This finding is also supported by the researchers' observation, as evidenced by the fact that they wrote on a few of their copies that 'the learner is merely at the decoding stage of reading'. Moreover, this shows that the public school classes have students with extremely varied proficiency levels in one class. Similarly, the reading speed shows a lot of variation, with a minimum value of 26 to a maximum value of 149 words per minute. This extensive range of students required a deeper insight into the WCPM; hence, a scatter plot was generated to comment on the students' reading fluency levels (Figure 1).

The scatter plot in Figure 1 shows that the maximum number of learners falls between 50 and 100 words per minute, with a few students recording speeds below 50 words per minute. Similarly, even a smaller number of learners lie above 100. Therefore, the effects of below-average and above-average learners cancel each other out, and 72 as the average WCPM for Grade 7 ESL learners seems to be a correct measure. However, such large mixed-ability classes can be challenging for any reading programme, especially when applied to this population.

Comparison with oral reading fluency norms

The second research question aimed to compare the ORF scores of ESL Pakistani learners with ORF norms to comment on the status of reading fluency proficiency.

Table 5 shows the comparison of the average WCPM of Grade 7 ESL learners with ORF norms presented by

TABLE 5: Comparison of oral reading fluency norms with Grade 7 English second language learners' scores.

Percentile	First language oral reading fluency norms (N = 10 687)	Pakistani learners (N = 109)	No. learners
	WCPM	WCPM	
90	176	-	0
75	154	-	3
50	127	-	7
25	102	-	34
10	79	72	65

N, number of scores; WCPM, words correct per minute.

Johns and Berglund (2010). The average value of 72 falls in the 10th percentile for fall ORF norms, which also lie in the 10th percentile. The target reading rate for any group is at least 5 words less than the 50th percentile ($127 - 5 = 122$ words per minute for Grade 7). The average reading rate of Grade 7 ESL learners is 50 words per minute, less than the target. Table 5 shows that only seven learners in Grade 7 public schools are in the 50th percentile, and just three learners are in the 75th percentile. Ninety per cent of learners are below the 50th percentile, which is alarming. The oral reading scores of Pakistani public school Grade 7 ESL learners are extremely low, indicating a need for intensive reading fluency interventions in public schools. The current snapshot of ORF scores for Grade 7 ESL learners is quite disappointing.

The 50th percentile ORF scores for Grades 3, 4, and 5 are 72, 94, and 107 for fall, according to Johns and Berglund (2010). Hence, Grade 7 ESL learners in Pakistan meet the reading fluency target typically expected of Grade 3 learners. This is a significant difference, which may be attributed to the lack of emphasis on developing learners' reading fluency in public schools in Pakistan.

Data analysis and discussion

The research was conducted to determine the ORF scores of ESL learners, and it was found that the Grade 7 ESL learners' average of 72 is higher than Jeon's (2012) reported 62 WCPM for Grade 10 EFL learners in Korea. Similarly, Piper and Zuilkowski (2015) reported a very low score of 30 WCPM for Grade 2 ESL readers in Kenya. Studies on ORF scores in ESL and EFL countries over the last decade have yielded similar results to those found in this study.

Spaull (2015) reported that Grade 5 ESL South African learners performed at the same level as Grade 2 native American learners. Hence, the difference in ORF scores of native and second language learners is drastic. However, Spaull, in their research on South African students, developed a tentative benchmark based on their findings, which is 90–100 WPM for Grade 5. The ORF of second and foreign language learners cannot be directly compared to the ORF scores of native learners. Jimerson et al. (2013) report a 25 WCPM difference between EFL and ESL readers. Hence, the benchmark for Grade 7 ESL learners would be ($122 - 25 = 97$) 97 WCPM, and our sample still does not meet this criterion and lags by 25 words. Still, there is no attention on developing learners' fluency in ESL contexts.

The research reports a high percentage of errors during reading, which is 17%. WCPM depends upon the speed of reading and the number of errors committed. A good reader is one who reads with accuracy and commits fewer errors. Therefore, ESL learners need to read with speed and reduce errors, as Mathson, Allington and Solic (2006) argue that accuracy emerges first, followed by speed and intonation. However, during data collection, the sample students focused on reading with speed and paid less attention to errors. A crucial aspect of understanding low ORF scores among ESL learners is the relationship between fluency and comprehension. Fluency does not always correlate with comprehension, particularly in ESL contexts. Many ESL students can read words correctly but struggle to understand the meaning of those words due to limited language proficiency. This 'fluency-comprehension gap' can result in ESL learners achieving low fluency scores while still demonstrating strong comprehension when given sufficient time to process the text or supported reading strategies. This observation calls for a shift in how fluency is assessed, focusing not only on speed but also on accuracy and comprehension.

The sample consisted of a mixed-ability group, with some students at the decoding stage. Spaul (2015) reported a similar finding for Grade 5 South African English language learners. He found that 41% of the sample were non-English-speaking readers, reading at an average of 17 WCPM. The present study reports non-readers of English in Grade 7, too. The difference is that they have been working on developing the fluency of their learners for a decade now, but in Pakistan, there has been no attention ever paid to developing fluency (Dogar & Shah 2024; Sultana et al. 2024).

Yildiz et al. (2019) reported 120 WCPM by Grade 8 Turkish students in a study that confirms the relationship between reading fluency, comprehension, and academic performance across all school subjects: language arts, mathematics, science, English, history, and religion. This is the highest ORF score ever reported for ESL learners in research. It is because Turkey has run reading intervention programmes in schools at the state level and focused on developing reading fluency, as the stakeholders clearly understand the direct relationship between reading fluency, reading comprehension, and academic performance.

Pretorius and Spaul (2016) and Piper and Zuilkowski (2015) recommend ORF scores for screening and monitoring the progress of ESL readers. It helps identify learners who need reading support before falling too far behind. Therefore, oral reading, particularly developing reading fluency, should be a major part of reading instruction in ESL contexts (Rupley et al. 2020). It was found that only three students are at optimum reading fluency scores for Grade 7, that is, 122 WCPM. Therefore, 90% – 95% of students in the sample require intensive reading fluency intervention. Moreover, it was found that ESL learners who received regular oral reading practice, feedback, and engagement with texts at their instructional level significantly improved their ORF

scores. This underscores the importance of incorporating fluency-building strategies into ESL curricula, such as repeated reading, choral reading, and paired reading, to help students gain confidence and fluency over time.

The research yielded some allied findings to determine a suitable grade fluency test for Grade 7 ESL learners; the readability index of Grade 7 textbooks was calculated. The readability index of each chapter in the Class 7 English textbook varies from that of the others. There is a huge variation, ranging from as easy as a Grade 3-level text to as difficult as a Grade 11-level text. Grabe and Stoller (2019) comment that some ESL contexts expose learners to very easy texts, and in some other contexts, they 'read text far more difficult than they should be encountering' (p. 53). This is exactly the case in the Grade 7 English textbook. Exposing learners to texts of varying difficulty beyond their instructional level while teaching ESL can lead to confusion and demotivation, as some texts may be beyond the learners' zones of proximal development. The Grade 7 English textbook published by the Punjab Textbook Board is a mixed bag regarding text difficulty.

Conclusion

The study reported the ORF scores for Grade 7 ESL learners in Pakistan. The average WCPM was calculated as 72, which is 50 words read per minute less than ORF norms and 25 words less than the benchmark determined for ESL learners. According to research, this is a typical pattern observed in most EFL/ESL countries. Moreover, the English textbook of Grade 7 by the Punjab Textbook Board, Lahore, is a hotchpotch regarding text complexity. Therefore, it is concluded that no systematic reading practice resulted in low overall reading fluency (ORF) scores for Pakistani ESL learners. Pretorius and Spaul (2016) claim that low ORF scores suggest that systematic reading is not taught in schools, indicating limited exposure to and practice of reading skill. Dogar and Shah (2024) report that systematic reading is not taught in schools, and the low ORF scores reported in the present study support this claim. Therefore, systematic reading intervention is proposed to be implemented in Pakistan's public schools to improve the learners' ORF profile. Farukh, Anwar and Ali (2023) and Rubab and Shah (2022) have also proposed the adoption of specialised strategies to enhance literacy skills. Moreover, it is concluded that the English textbook of Grade 7 by the Punjab Textbook Board, Lahore, is a hotchpotch in terms of text complexity.

Future directions

This data represent the first-ever calculated ORF score for any grade in Pakistan. It is a small-scale research project conducted as part of a PhD dissertation, limited to one public school in Punjab. It is highly recommended that oral reading norms of ESL learners in public schools of Pakistan be calculated at the government level, and ORF progress monitoring be initiated. The research does not claim to be

generalizable to all public schools. However, it is claimed that the situation might not be very different, as there is no evidence of any systematic reading practices in public schools in Pakistan (Dogar & Shah 2024). When not addressed explicitly, there is a high chance of a similar situation being prevalent in most schools.

It is recommended that the English textbook for Grade 7 be revised and rewritten, as it has varying text complexity. Exposing learners to such textbooks exacerbates the problems in second language learning. It is recommended that the Punjab Textbook Board conduct a readability analysis of all textbooks. The research has implications for textbook designers, who should verify the readability index of the text to ensure it is suitable for the recommended grade level when designing books. Tailored interventions and instructional strategies are necessary to address the gaps in both fluency and comprehension, thereby improving academic outcomes for ESL learners.

The issue of low ORF among ESL learners is complex and multifaceted, influenced by factors such as language proficiency, cultural and linguistic differences, instructional practices, and the relationship between fluency and comprehension. Current research emphasises the need for tailored, language-specific interventions that consider these factors. By focusing on vocabulary development, providing culturally relevant materials, and adopting differentiated instructional strategies, educators can help ESL learners build stronger ORF. Additionally, it is important to recognise that fluency should be assessed in conjunction with comprehension, ensuring that ESL learners' true reading abilities are accurately measured.

Given these insights, future research should continue to explore the most effective methods for supporting ESL learners in achieving fluency and comprehension. Studies are particularly needed to examine the impact of bilingual and multilingual contexts on fluency development and the effectiveness of various instructional techniques in diverse ESL populations.

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Authors' contributions

M.F.D. was responsible for the conceptualisation and data collection, and contributed to data analysis, writing, and reviewing the manuscript. S.K.S. developed the methodology and managed the project administration, in addition to contributing to data analysis, writing, and reviewing the

manuscript. M.I. managed the software, validation, and visualisation processes, and took part in data analysis, writing, and reviewing the manuscript. N.A. secured funding and managed resource acquisition, while also contributing to data analysis, writing, and reviewing the manuscript.

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Data availability

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