

## COMPARISON OF READING LITERACY SITUATION OF IRANIAN FOURTH-GRADE STUDENTS WITH PARTICIPANT COUNTRIES OF REGION IN PIRLS STUDY: SUGGESTION OF PROPER CURRICULUM

Dr. Mohammad Rahmanpour\*<sup>1</sup>, Mojtaba Ahmadi<sup>2</sup>, Mostafa Hatami<sup>3</sup>, Hamzeh Mirzaee<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD degree in study of curriculum and professor of PayamNour and Islamic Azad universities & Teacher's Education, Iran

<sup>2</sup> MA, Educational Planning, University of Isfahan, Iran

<sup>3</sup>PhD student of Curriculum at the University of Hormozgan, Iran

<sup>4</sup>MA in Psychology of Exceptional Children, University of Allameh Tabataba'i, Iran – Visiting lecturer at Department of Psychology, Payamenoor University of Borujen, Iran.

[mohammad\\_33564@yahoo.com](mailto:mohammad_33564@yahoo.com)

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is comparative consideration of literacy situation among Iranian fourth-grade students with selected countries and suggestion of proper curriculum. To this end, from region countries, the countries that are participated in PIRLS study and their information is accessible selected for consideration and comparison. Also, for the section of proper curriculum suggestion, 12 clear-sighted persons were interviewed. The interviews performed by half structured approach and their content validity confirmed by experts and analyzed by categorization approach. The results show that the skill of literacy of Iranian fourth-grade students has acceptable advancement in comparison with most of selected countries that this advancement was more among the years of 2006-2011. Also, according to results, suggested curriculum puts its purpose on comprehension and high level cognitive processes for improving reading skill and uses various and rich contents with educational approaches and active and compound evaluation.

**Keywords:** reading skill, comparison, fourth-grade, Iran, curriculum

### INTRODUCTION

To the belief of clear-sighted persons, one of areas that help human for effective communication with internal and external worlds is literature. This area as one of historical areas can affect considerably the thought of individuals in the form of curriculums. Literature is used in different meanings. Oxford dictionary defines literature as a collection of written materials in certain period or country that motivates feelings and has emotional impact in addition to motivating beauty feeling (Slager, 2010). Although definition of literature is not clear very much, but all people agree that it is important for all students (Felski, 2008).

Many of researchers believe that literature includes several important educational functions like development of literary sciences of students (Pieper, 2006), increase of literacy skills (Pike, 2006, Van Iseghem, 2009) and increase of social and cultural knowledge (Moumou, 2005, and Pieper et al. 2007) that curriculum of schools should cover them. Two important aspects of literature are reading and writing literature that considered in curriculum of countries especially in their elementary schools. Learners prepare for learning main skills of writing, calculating and reading in elementary schools that are most populous schools (AghaZadeh, 2013). Elementary school has important role in growth of concepts and meaning of affairs that child encounters with them in routine life. In addition, in this period, reading as one of basic and early skills of learners is proved for formation of personality growth and future scholastic achievement and this period is emphasized in the form of daily and weekly curriculum.

Research studies about reading skill show that reading is cognitive complicated activity that is important for achieving desirable performance and information in the current society and also remember and meaning education (Alfassi, 2006). Reading focuses on skill and literacy on

understanding of message and content that writer registers with symbols and verbal secret (Mesbah et al. 2013). In Pirls, literacy is defined as the ability of understanding and using different forms of written language that are required for society or valuable for individuals (Nmdari Pejman & KiaManesh, 2011). Students need to inform about how they learn through reading in order to enter current educated society and relate with success.

Reading is defined as an active process that learners discriminate among resources from information, embark meaning and strategies, control their understanding and use social group for reflection of their responses (Zare & Othman, 2014). This view of reading is reflection of opinions of literacy as interactive constituent process and readers are considered as active creators of meaning that are familiar with effective strategies of reading and approaches of thinking and contemplation about reading (Ruddel & Unrau, 2005). For this effect of reading skill on academic and personal life of learners that nowadays national and international studies and considerations are performed for evaluation of literacy and reading skill of elementary students and its results publish in different levels with variable purposes and dimensions. The importance of this area is such that some countries have upper hand documents and special charters for its development in addition to inclusion of content and related subjects with reading in their curriculum.

International study of reading skill progress (PIRLS) is one of most extensive and important comparative studies in evaluation of academic advancement that performed Quinquennial under supervision of international association of education advancement (IEA). This association that is valid and independent institution, with the purpose of improvement and promotion of educational situation of participant countries, can perform several comparative studies in the field of academic progress. Achieved findings and information from such sources of studies are determinative and important source for exploration and recognition of drawbacks and power points of educational systems of countries in national and international scale and also presentation of scientific approaches is effective for improving teaching-learning process (academy of Persian language and literature, 2013).

Islamic Republic of Iran country started its coordination officially with this association from 1370 solar, equal with 1991 and participated in three studies of PIRLS in the years of 2001, 2006 and 2011. Also Iran wants to participate in this study in 2016. In three accomplished studies, 35, 45 and 55 countries or educational systems participated, respectively. In 2011, execution of PIRLS study held simultaneously in member states for the first time that its results are considerable especially for fourth-grade students. PIRLS designed to present valid information about quality of literacy of fourth-grade students (students between 9-10 years old) by emphasis on school, family and personal factors. PIRLS considers basic skills of literacy of students in elementary school determinative for other learning (Mebah et al. 2013). Selection of population of fourth-grade students performed for this reason that this level considered as important passing from child growth matter in reading skill (Mullis et al. 2008). In educational system of Iran, maximum number of 9 years old students educate in fourth-grade (academy of Persian language and literature, 2013).

Literacy has three dimensions: process of comprehension, behavior of reading and attitude to reading. Dimensions 1 and 2 measured by execution of written tests of comprehension (questions of reading comprehension skill) and third dimension by quadruplet questionnaires (survey, student, teacher and school) (Martin et al. 2006).

In terms of main purpose of PIRLS study for improving educational situation of participant countries in different courses, by using results of this area during different courses and consultation with experts in this field and its reflection in curriculums, we can achieve such purpose and prophecy. Based on this matter, the purpose of present research is comparative consideration of reading skill in Iran with region states in the fourth-grade students to suggest desirable curriculum. For this aim, at first the results of PIRLS study about fourth-grade students of compared countries presented and analyzed. In the following, proper curriculum for improving and developing reading skills of these students based on view of clear-sighted persons.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research in terms of type included in combinational researches that performed by comparative and survey approach. According to this matter, from participant countries in PIRLS study, Middle

East countries selected purposefully for comparison. The number of region countries that participated in the study and their information was available, 10 countries of Georgia, Azerbaijan, Israel, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Morocco, Turkey and Arab Emirates selected and considered. Information of these countries collected from specific site of PIRLS studies in Iran and world and also consideration of analytical and comparative studies and researches and analyzed in the form of research questions. In another section of research, 12 individuals selected for interview purposefully among clear-sighted persons of considered area for suggestion of proper curriculum (individuals that have researches and studies in the field of PIRLS study or experience of teaching and study in the field of reading skill). The interview performed half structured that its content validity confirmed before execution by experts. Interviews performed between half and 45 minutes and collected data analyzed by the approach of categorization.

## FINDINGS

In this section, findings of two considered approaches were analyzed in the form of research questions. At first, findings of comparative study presented and then results of interviews introduced.

**First question: how much substantive domain of official statements of curriculum of reading skill parallels with its related textbooks?**

**Table 1:** documents of curriculum of states reading skill based on type of document and lesson subject

Country name	Strategy or official instruction of reading curriculum	Minimum one lesson in the reading area
Georgia	yes	yes
Azerbaijan	No	yes
Turkey	yes	yes
Iran	No	yes
United Arab Emirates	No	yes
Saudi Arabia	No	No
Qatar	No	No
Oman	No	yes
Morocco	yes	yes
Israel	yes	yes

As it is observed from table 1, Georgia, Turkey, Morocco and Israel have strategy and official instruction for reading skill but other countries including Iran do not have such approach and field.

**Second question: how is the situation of Iran in comparison with countries in the area fourth-grade students reading skill?**

**Table 2:** situation of Iran in comparison with compared countries in the area of fourth-grade students' literacy

Country name	Situation in comparison with previous course	Average score in PIRLS	Function in relation to Iran
Georgia	progress	488	higher
Azerbaijan	progress	462	higher

Turkey	Neither progress not regress	449	lower
Iran	progress	457	higher
United Arab Emirates	regress	439	lower
Saudi Arabia	regress	430	lower
Qatar	regress	425	lower
Oman	Invisible progress	391	lower
Morocco	regress	310	lower
Israel	progress	542	higher

Based on information of table 2, it can be said that only three countries of Israel, Georgia and Azerbaijan have higher average rather than Iran in the last PIRLS study (2011) and other countries had lower performance than Iran. Information of table also shows that four countries progress rather than previous course and four countries regress. Two countries also show invisible progress or regress.

**Third research question: how is performance process of Iran in reading literacy in comparison with performance process of participant countries?**

**Table 3:** performance process of Iran in reading literacy in comparison with performance process of participant countries

Country name	Study course	Average score
Georgia	2011	488 (3/1)
	2006	471 (3/1)
turkey	2011	449 (3/2)
	2006	446 (3/1)
Iran	2011	457 (2/8)
	2006	421 (3/1)
	2001	414 (4/2)
United Arab Emirates	2011	439 (4/2)
	2006	412 (4/3)
Qatar	2011	425 (3/5)
	2006	353 (1/1)
Morocco	2011	310 (3/9)
	2006	323 (5/9)
	2001	350 (9/6)
Israel	2011	541 (2/7)
	2006	512 (3/3)
	2001	509 (2/8)

Information of table 3 shows that four countries of Iran, Georgia, Israel and United Arab Emirates have ascending process in progress during study courses. But Morocco and Qatar have descending process. Turkey also repeated previous process. Based on table information, the maximum process of progress is between 2006-2011 for Iran (36) and minimum process for turkey (three scores). Also, most descending process is related to Qatar with 28 scores.

**Fourth research question: how is the performance process of Iranian fourth-grade students of PIRIS from years of 2001-2011?**

**Table 4:** performance process of Iranian fourth-grade students of PIRLS from 2001-2011

Differences among courses		Average performance	PIRLS study
2001	2006		
44	36	457	2011
7		421	2006
		414	2001

Information of table 4 shows that scores of Iranian students in 2001 were 414 but increase to 421 in 2006 and 457 in 2011 that indicated ascending process. As during years of 2001-2006, performance of fourth-grade students was 7 scores but during years of 2006-2011 shows increase of 36 scores.

**Fifth research question: what is suggested curriculum of experts for improving reading skill of fourth-grade students in Iran?**

In this section, achieved data from interview with experts are analyzed by categorization approach. In terms of this point that curriculum in most of literature of this area has four dimensions of purposes, contents, teaching-learning strategies and evaluation approaches, related finding about this question also presented in the form of four mentioned factors.

A. **Purposes of suggested curriculum:** in the belief of most of interviewees (9 persons), suggested curriculum should focus its purposes more on comprehension, dominance on reading two or more languages, dominance on mother tongue and educational official language and reading with the aim of understanding hidden and clear meanings of messages and written texts. In this relation, one of interviewees believes that the purpose of training reading skill should be improvement of learners understanding from written texts not just simple reading. This kind of reading needs dominance on language elements and recognition of writer culture and also awareness of critical reading principles (number 3). Another interviewee also declares that in terms of this point that for nationalities in the country, official training language (Persian) is something except their mother tongue, reading skills should be accompanied with understanding and accurate usage of meanings because many of them face with difficulties in their lessons like mathematics because of misapprehension of problem description not mathematics itself. Of course, this problem is not related only to this group of students but it is further in them (number 11). Mentioned declaration also emphasized by interviewees 1, 6 and 7.

B. **Contents and title of suggested curriculum:** about contents and titles, most of experts believe that the contents will be suitable for improving reading skill that focuses its attention on more stable skills like understanding, evaluation of texts, creation of divergent thought and flexibility in thought and encounter with different ideas instead of emphasis on apparent skills. Interviewees 6 and 12 believe that current contents in reading lessons can fewer improve real reading skills. These contents are emphasized on dyslexic, fast reading and correct pronunciation while out need is something more. Interviewee 5 declares that if the purpose of reading skill is understanding of texts and evaluation of thoughts and its hidden contents, available contents and lessons won't manage such

responsibility. Desirable contents are the contents that presented with different forms and organized according to understanding and cognitive growth of learners. Such contents have different written and pictorial forms and clear instruction for description of meanings and correct reading. Also, interviewee 4 expressed that related contents and titles with reading, in addition to cultural mutual inland and extraterritorial points, should emphasize differences and reflect them properly in texts. Also, it reveals and describes available innovation aspects in texts. This matter caused that students focus on contents and their reading more and also cultural familiarity and interaction is provided. According to view of interviewee 7, existence of related contents to cultural and literary personalities and elements of readers of bilingual regions in the form of Persian language can be efficient in improving attitude to reading and also familiarity with national and cultural values.

**C. Teaching-learning strategies of suggested curriculum:** about mentioned question, experts believe that education teachers and managers should use direct and indirect strategies in combined, interactive and active approaches in order to improve reading. Desirable approaches focus on learner more than teacher in the view of interviewees. Also, independent and directed practices can help more learning. Interviewees 1, 3 and 6 believe that teachers should change their educational methods to activity of learner and avoid direct interference. Learners should interact and act and teacher supervise the. He registers changes step by step to inform process of student reading progress. Interviewee number 8 also declares that what our schools need in the reading area is something more than current situation. Teachers should employ the integrative process and avoid simple and linear processes. Students need to come back in some places and interact with other places and humans to understand tongue and cultural elements more.

Students dislike imposition of something, they want to consider and search for what they read and hear. One of other interviewees believes that for better understanding, what is important is existence of creative and informed teachers that change their methods based on situation and progress of learners and apply combination of direct and indirect approaches. For example, he can use pre-organized and descriptive approaches in the beginning of the lesson and for consolidation and fixation of this lesson uses group discussion methods (number 1). Interviewee number 5 believes that teachers should use environmental situation for improving learners reading skill in addition to classroom. Teachers can provide learners for independent learning by learners' homework. For example, they define group and single projects for learners that its execution required interaction with other individuals like parents and famous people and refer to different written sources and texts simultaneously. In the following, they are forced to express their result by special tongue.

**D. Evaluation ways for suggested curriculum:** most of interviewees believe that proper educational approaches for improvement of reading skill are combination of mental and visual approaches based on learners' personal difference and abilities. These approaches should be learning-based and problem-based more rather than teacher based. Interviewee number 3 expresses that proper educational approaches should free themselves from special contents that are considered in the classroom and they emphasize on unconsidered contents and texts. This matter causes that teachers assure that learners' reading is not based on repetition and memorization approach and can identify their weak points well. Interviewee numbers 4 and 7 also believe that although visual evaluation approaches are necessary but they are not enough and teachers should force learners to evaluate, consider and even judge the texts in addition to texts reading in order to grow their understanding power and criticizing thought. This is the case that our learners need today.

In this relation, interviewee number 11 declares that reading skill has different dimensions and evaluations approaches should be focused on all dimensions. For example, dyslexic, fast reading and correct pronunciation are the skills that should be improved. But the skills like understanding meaning of words and sentences also must be evaluated. For this aim, it is better to measure reading skill not only in reading lesson but also in other lessons like science and mathematics. It means that learners are encountered with current problems in these lessons and ask them to describe problem before answering and say that what problem needs? They believe that learners should encounter with different forms of written texts either in terms of appearance, structure and content in different situations in order to measure their amount of understanding and perception from these texts. For

example, texts can be described in modes of question, predicative and descriptive for them and evaluate their intended response.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this research show that reading is one of basic skills of students especially in elementary school that attracts states attention. According to results of first research question, this attention leads to formulation and adoption of instructions and political statements about curriculum of these countries. Table 1 shows that some of countries have high level documents and instructions but in our country, there isn't any certain source and strategy for this matter in macro level. What existed is special lesson about reading and its skills. It seems that based on performed progresses in many countries and their modification acts in their educational system and also invasion of informational and virtual technologies, high volume of information and necessity of attention to cultural and ethnic multiplicity and plurality, existence of high level document is necessary with clear contents and instructions and principles that observed both obligations and progress condition of reading skill and different needs of students of regions and different minorities. Presence of such document prevents unfocused decision-making and performance and makes possible proper curriculum formulation.

The results of second research questions show that fourth-grade students of some compared countries have higher score than Iran in the last study of PIRLS (2011). But it has higher score in comparison with other countries (457) and this matter shows progress of Iran country. In this relation, three countries of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Israel have higher score than Iran and remained six countries have lower performance than Iran. However, some of these countries have high level documents in this area. This matter shows that only existence of high level documents and adoption of political strategies and policies won't lead to progress of reading skill of students but necessity of performing modification and purposeful acts is inevitable need in the school educational processes.

Results of third and fourth research questions show that Iran country has ascending progress process during study courses. According to table 3, maximum progress was for Iran during 2006-2011 (36 scores). In the other words, in regional report, Islamic Republic of Iran in terms of performance process during three courses of study (2001, 2006 and 2011) for student progress of fourth-grade students achieves first rank among other participant countries. Scores of Iranian students in 2001 was 414 but in 2006 it achieved 421 and in 2011, it was 457 that displayed ascending and growing process as during the years of 2001-2006, performance of fourth-grade students increases 7 scores but in 2006-2011 36 scores. Probably, one of the factors of this success is changing of content and teaching method of Persian textbooks of elementary school with the title of reading and writing. By proportion of purpose base with Pirls 2006, the role of these changes in improving reading skill of students is determined with confession of experts and teachers.

However, performance of Iranian students in reading literacy in all courses of PIRLS was lower than international average (score 500) and it was lower in comparison with some of participant countries of the region (without considering performance process) that is alarming in terms of predictions of perspective document (Iran 1404. Maybe evolution in current process of formulation and presentation of lessons or type of curriculum of this area in schools and survey from experts and specialties can accelerate it in addition to protection of mentioned process and causes achievement to real place of Iranian students in reading skill and literacy.

About mentioned necessity, results of fifth research question show that suggested curriculum of experts puts its emphasis on improving understanding and perception skills in reading to progress in other lessons that are needed reading for resolving problems in addition to needed skills of reading lesson (reading and writing).

Mentioned curriculum has various contents and headlines in terms of forms of presentation and compatibility with different minorities needs students and languages. Such contents improve both learning attitudes and abilities of learners and evaluation power and meaning and literary understanding of them. The necessity of desirable presentation of such contents is use of different teaching-learning approaches that are based on activity and interaction of learners and teachers play the role of guide and facilitator. Also, these approaches accomplished by reference of learners to

human and written resources out of institute and consideration of cultural elements and introduction in the classroom in the form of group discussion and question and answer. Finally, in suggested curriculum, the approaches are predicted for evaluation in which learners measured by mental and visual approaches. When information and knowledge of learners measured, it is better that emphasis is based on visual approaches and in the occasions that the purpose is measurement of their understanding and abilities, mental approaches will have more meaningful results by emphasis on problem-based situations.

Generally, to improve learning skills of fourth-grade students, we consider the results of PIRLS studies nationally and internationally in the first level. Also, by performing comparative and determinative researches, power points and drawbacks were considered and try to improve and modification of drawbacks and consolidation of power points. Continuous consideration of results of comparative studies and gradual and linear researches about reading in the curriculum processes can operate approaches and needs and step on further progress by achieving necessary feedbacks.

## REFERENCES

- Academy of Persian Language and Literature (2013). PIRLS (international study of reading literacy development) and its role in promoting language skills in Iran, Department of Persian Language and Literature, publication number 8.
- Aghazadeh, A. (2013). Comparative education. Tehran: SAMT Publication.
- Alfassi, M. (2006). Reading to learn: Effects of combined strategy instruction on high school students. *Journal of Educational Research*, 97(4), 171-184.
- Felski, R. (2008). *Uses of literature*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Martin, M.O. Mullis & Kennedy, A.M. PIRLS (2006). International report, Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College.
- Mesbah, M, Faghani, M, Adib, M. and health, F. (2013). Pedagogical impact on reading skills and comprehension of English students Midwifery, Nursing and Midwifery, 24(73): 79-72.
- Moumou, M. (2005). The Literature Study Programme Trial: Challenging Constructions of English in the Seychelles. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 4(2), 35-45.
- Mullis, I. V., Martin, M. O., Kennedy, A. M. & Foy, P. (2008). PIRLS 2006 International Report. Boston College: TIMSS & PIRLS international study center.
- Namdari P., Mehdi. and Kiamanesh, Alireza (2011). Cognitive factors for individual and family-sized elementary students in reading comprehension participating in PIRLS 2006, *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, (20): 57-37.
- Pieper, I. (2006). The teaching of literature. Retrieved July 29, 2010, from [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Pieper\\_EN.doc](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Pieper_EN.doc).
- Pike, M. (2006). From Beliefs to Skills: The Secularization of Literacy and the Moral Education of Citizens. *Journal of Beliefs & Values*, 27(3), 281-289.
- Pieper, I., Aase, L., Fleming, M., & Samahaian, F. (2007). Text, literature and "Bildung". Retrieved July 29, 2010, from [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Prague07\\_LS\\_EN.doc](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Prague07_LS_EN.doc).
- Ruddell, R. B., & Unrau, N. J. (Eds.). (2005). *Theoretical Models and Processes of Reading* (5th Ed.). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.
- Slager, M. G. (2010). A comparative study into the literature curricula in secondary education in six European countries, Thesis of Master of Science in Education, University of Groningen August, 2010.
- Van Iseghem, J. (2009) Legitimaties van literatuuronderwijs. Over het kluwen van onze goede bedoelingen en het doorknippen van de draad. Wie is er bang van het portfolio? Tweedaagse over literatuuronderwijs KU Leuven/SLO Nederland's.
- Zare, P., & Othman, M. (2014). The Relationship between Reading Comprehension and Reading Strategy Use among Malaysian ESL Learners, *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 3, (13): 187-193.