

Pakistani English Stories for Children: Linguistic and Technical Analysis

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Abstract

The quality of language produced is greatly influenced by the quality of language input. Reading is a major source of language and knowledge input. In Pakistan, two types of books written in the English language are available for the reader. The first type includes the books written and published in Pakistan and the second type is of the books written by foreign authors published in or outside Pakistan. The purpose of this study was to analyze 5 storybooks written and published in Pakistan. The linguistic analysis and technical analysis of the books were carried out to explore the kind of material which is being produced locally and is readily available to Pakistani children. The focus of the study was on the English language and technical components of the storybooks. The findings of the study reveal that the storybooks contain several language-related problems and technical deficiencies in story writing elements. Hence it is concluded that proofreading for language and technical refinement for the storybooks can help improve the work quality.

Keywords: English language teaching, linguistic analysis, English storybooks, reading for pleasure, reading material

Introduction

The English Language is a prerequisite for Pakistani graduates and is taught as a second language and compulsory subject at every level of education from

primary to graduation (Kausar et al., 2016). The constitution of Pakistan grants English the status of the official language of the country. Not only, in Pakistani society preference and prestige are accorded to the people having English proficiency but the English language, itself is given a high prestige by the government as it is officially the medium of instruction in governmental documentation and in academia. On the contrary, the English language proficiency of most Pakistani students is not satisfactory when it comes to language usage in real-life situations (Aftab, 2011).

Books are considered one of the major sources of language development. There are mainly two types of books that students usually read: Textbooks and other suggested reading material. A language learning classroom cannot be taken seriously by students without having a textbook (Mukundan & Ahour, 2010). Hence, textbooks are the most important element of any ESL classroom and a good textbook contains material for the development of all four language skills (Kausar et al., 2016).

In Pakistan, textbooks are published by government textbook boards and private publishers. Unfortunately, the standard of these textbooks is not up to the required level. This dismal state of textbooks has been accepted by the Ministry of Education itself as “in Pakistan, the education publishing sector as a whole and the role textbooks and learning materials can play in the development of education are largely underdeveloped” (National Education Policy Review Team, 2006, p. 53). Warsi (2004) also affirms the inadequacy of textbooks in Pakistan as these do not contain the qualities that would hone the linguistic needs of the students such as acquiring the structures of the target language. To fill this gap, other reading material or storybooks for extended reading are suggested. These books are mainly suggested as a source of language development and pleasure reading. This pleasure reading should lead to increased imagination, a desire to re-read the book, and consequent acquisition of language skills such as writing and critical thinking.

The books for pleasure reading are either locally published or imported from abroad. However, if the language learning material is locally produced, it not only is cost effective but is also contextualized according to the reader’s context. Furthermore, an interesting story increases the imagination of the readers while memorable characters and plot draws a child to re-read the story. Alongside this, the exemplary use of grammar and diction may lead to proficiency in writing and

deeper critical thinking skills. Nevertheless, it must be kept in mind that it is not only the content but also the presentation of a storybook that draws a reader towards it.

The focus of this study was to explore whether these qualities are present in Pakistani reading material, specifically, storybooks for children written and published in Pakistan. This is because the better the language input provided to students, the more significant will be the output by them and one of the sources of providing language input is reading, particularly when reading for pleasure. Thus, the quality of not only the textbooks but also other reading material is significant and cannot be compromised. The available research (Karamouzian et al., 2011; Tehreem, 2017) in the local context on language learning material includes investigation of the classroom material but not necessarily of the material which may be part of reading for pleasure. Since reading for pleasure is an essential element of language acquisition, this study has been undertaken to explore the materials produced in Pakistan with the intent to answer the following question: What are the linguistic and technical features of selected Pakistani English storybooks?

Literature Review

Language development is the process of advancement of a person's language skills which include listening, speaking, reading, and writing. These four basic language skills are recognized as 'macro skills' in the literature (Aydogan, 2014), and are strongly integrated. Several studies highlight the complex relationship between language skills and posit that language development is considered incomplete if a learner lacks any of the skills. (Aydogan, 2014; Deneme & Ada, 2010; Elbow, 2000; Hartley, 2007).

Relation among Basic Language Skills

Four basic skills of the English language are categorized into receptive skills and productive skills. Listening skills and reading skills are part of receptive skills while writing skills, and speaking skills come under productive skills. According to the integrated approach, all of these skills support each other, but there is a direct relation between listening and speaking skills and reading and writing skills. According to Temple and Gillet (1984), "listening cannot be separated from the expressive aspect of oral communication" (p. 70). Consequently, the language that a learner receives from listening influences the language which the learner speaks.

Likewise, reading and writing directly influence each other as mastery in writing is connected to extensive reading. Bhatt and Lilian, (2016) report that writers incorporate and reflect those structures, vocabulary, and knowledge in their writing which they have read as readers. Based on observation, it can be said that prolific writers are avid readers. Hence it can be concluded that language learners' speaking and writing skills are based on their reading and listening skills.

Importance of Reading Material in Language Learning

According to Grabe (1991), reading material plays a vital role in the Language Development of children. While maintaining the significance of reading material in children's further language development, Lesaux and Siegal (2003) recognized phonological processing, awareness of syntax, and working memory as the significant cognitive processes in development of reading skills. Describing the efficacy of developing critical thinking skills in students of all levels, Chaffe (1992) emphatically stated that critical thinking is a necessary and significant skill that develops the literacy abilities of learners and aids in the development of knowledge. This leads to the significant role that reading material plays in the development of critical thinking. Owing to the above discussion, it can be said that the choice of reading material is one of the most thoughtful decisions that ELT practitioners need to make.

Pleasure Reading

Pleasure reading is defined as the reading of books and stories which "typically involves materials that reflect our own choice, at a time and place that suits us" (Clark & Rumbold, 2006, p. 6). Strauss (2014) acknowledged that reading habits are developed when the habit of reading for pleasure is acquired. What is more important about pleasure reading is that it has a positive impact on students' vocabulary development, comprehension skills, and grammar (Whitten et al., 2016). Reading for enjoyment also supplements formal reading comprehension skills that are required for academic purposes (Boakye, 2017). Several notable research studies have provided considerable literature maintaining the relationship between pleasure reading and the development of other language skills. Thorndike (1973) reported that the subjects who had the habits of reading more were better in overall language proficiency. Whitten et al. (2016) accentuated that students who read for pleasure have a higher rate of academic success as compared to their non-reading counterparts.

Role of Story-Books in Language Learning

Storybooks can greatly influence the language learning process of children (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983). Good storybooks are a source of intrinsic motivation for children and they help children in a natural acquisition of language through context and models of writing in the English language. It has been reported that illustrated storybooks have been found to provide ample language learning opportunities for young children (Whitehurst et al., 1988). Therefore, the use of illustrated storybooks can be highly effective in both first language and second language learning contexts.

Methodology

This study is an analysis of Pakistani English storybooks written for children. Three storybooks were from Children's Publishers and two from Paramount Publishers. All of the storybooks that have been analyzed in this study were written by Pakistani writers and published in Pakistan. The study focuses on both linguistic analysis and technical analysis; that is, word-level analysis was carried out along with the analysis of the literary elements.

Research Question

1. What are the linguistic and technical features of selected Pakistani English storybooks?

Elements of Literary Analysis

Literature is comprised of four characteristic elements which form the basis of its construction, and consequently, its analysis. These are namely, plot, character, setting, and theme. Table 1 presents the name of the publisher, the book code used in this study, the title of the stories, and the approximate word count.

Table 1*Sample of the Study*

Sr. No	Publisher's Name	Book Code	Title of the Stories	Words (Approximate)
1.	Children's Publisher	Book H1	Be Calm	110 Words
		Book H2	Visiting the Sick	110 Words
		Book H3	Be a Good Learner	110 Words
2.	Paramount	Book I 1	A Lesson Well Learnt	2000 Words
		Book I 2	Oddie's Adventure	1200 Words

By Children's Publisher, the first book 'Be Calm' is part of Level 2. It is a short story with illustrations with three questions at the end. The protagonist is a young boy who can manage anger in difficult situations and easily wins friends. This story is about the central theme of Anger Management and Mental Health.

The second book 'Visiting the Sick' belongs to the Young Reader's Good Habit story series. It is the story of a young boy whose grandparent is sick in hospital and eventually recovers and returns home.

The third book 'Be a Good Learner' by the same publisher is part of the Young Reader's Read and Shine Level 2 series. It is the story of a young student who practices good learner strategies. This booklet highlights good learner strategies but the challenges faced by a learner are not mentioned at all.

Both of the stories by Paramount are part of the Value Box reading series and are written by the same author.

'A Lesson Well Learnt' is about starting college life. The main character of the story is a young man called Rashid who is leaving for college. He is a high achiever and therefore very confident. Themes of humility and grace along with confidence in abilities are the focus of this story.

The second book 'Oddie's Adventure' is part of level 2 (ages 6-7 years) of the Value Box series. It contains an approximately 360 words introduction to the series and a 200 words introduction of the author. The story is approximately 1,200 words with illustrations on each page. The main character of the story is a young

donkey called Oddie who is reprimanded by her family for being careless. Themes of familial love and personal responsibility are the focus of this story.

Findings

The findings of this study have been categorized into two areas: Linguistic findings and technical findings. Linguistic findings cover language-related analysis of the books and technical findings include specific story writing-related analysis.

Linguistic Findings

Table 2 depicts language-related errors in the storybooks. The language-related problems are spellings, word repetition, adverb placement, adverb choice, sentence structure, diction, tense, punctuation, and word order.

Table 2

Linguistic Analysis

Error Type	Frequency	Book Code
Spelling	1	H1
	1	H2
	2	I1
Word repetition	1	H1
	2	H1
Adverb Placement	3	H3
	5	H2
Sentence structure	1	H3
	3	H2
Diction	3	H2
Tense	1	H3
Punctuation	2	H3
Word Order	1	I2

The spelling related errors include words such as ‘clam’ in H1, ‘Hospital’s rooms’ in H2, the spelling of ‘the’ and the start of the sentence with a small ‘I’ in I2, the spelling of ‘the’, start of the sentence with a small ‘I’. Secondly, there are some words which could have been alternated with suitable synonyms such as the word ‘Exercises’ in H1 is used twice. Similarly, adverb placement requires improvement, such as in the sentence, “For that he practices deep breathing daily”. Furthermore, sentence structure could have been improved since some sentences contain more

than two phrases with excessive use of ‘and’. For example: “He was happy when she got better and was with them and returned home again.” Likewise, there are tense related problems as well with the singular subject ‘read books’ is written which should be ‘reads books’ Finally, as far as punctuation is concerned, there is excessive use of a comma in sentences such as, “After learning a concept well, Hamza writes it down, so, he might not forget it later.”

Technical Analysis of H1

This story is about the central theme of Anger Management and Mental Health. However, it has an abrupt start which does not explicate the reasons for the main claim of ‘Anger is bad for us.’ Several statements are made which do not have any qualifiers preceding them. For example: on page 3, “When someone talks to him harshly.” Similar problem exists on page 5, “When someone misbehaves with him.” It is not explained that in which situation or what kind of person would behave in such a manner to the character. Why would anyone misbehave? There are often reasons for such happenings, but in this story, these behaviors are isolated incidents.

Similarly, and more importantly, the responses of the protagonist are prescriptively described as simplistic manners for example on page 2, “He starts counting on his fingers when someone talks harshly.” Also, on page 5, “He tries to remain calm when someone misbehaves with him.” The same issue can be seen on page 6, “When someone talks to (him) rudely, he doesn’t reply angrily, instead, he talks politely and finishes the fight”. These are examples of exemplary behavior. However, this level of anger management is achieved through major mentoring and behavioral training. To simplify such behaviors and to relate them to deep breathing and regular exercise is to create a state of confusion and guilt in the minds of the readers when in the future they are faced with such a situation and they are unable to generate the desired response as suggested by this book. Overall, it is a pleasantly illustrated book with content that aims to guide the readers. However, the over-simplification of anger management leaves much to be included.

Technical Analysis of H2

This story is comparatively more thematically realistic since generally, all people fall ill at various times of their life and when hospitalized often return

home recovered unless in the case of a severe tragedy. However, on page 1, the statement that “Ajmal’s grandmother got very sick as she was very old”, is an overgeneralization since in all cases being old may not mean sick. Also, the fact that one lesson at school brought a complete behavioral change seems a bit unrealistic. Perhaps, if this one lesson brought back memories of previous conversations or lessons and then led to behavioral change, it could have been more believable.

Technical Analysis of H3

It highlights good learner strategies, but the challenges such as boredom, fatigue, lack of interest, sickness, or stress which are faced by a learner are not mentioned. Also, the lesson of helping peers is complemented with the fact that it helps him to remember the concept which seems more of selfishness instead of morality.

Technical Analysis of I1

This story lacks imagination since the technique of ‘show not tell’ has been employed at a minimum which has reduced the imaginative element of story-telling. The title of the story reflects essay writing more than story-telling. Furthermore, stories need names to build up the scenario. Yet, this story uses phrases such as ‘The best school in the city’, ‘College located in another city’ all of which reduce the touch of reality in the story. The names, albeit fictional, of the best school, the college, and the cities, both of the residence and the college of the protagonist, would have added elements of interest. Some details are also superfluous. For example, carrying the gold pin in the pocket to wear any time, parents advising against boasting right before the child is leaving for the new city, and sitting at the ‘reserved’ table, all seem unnatural and forced towards character development.

Technical Analysis of I2

Themes of familial love and personal responsibility are the focus of this story. Although, this is an interesting story with the themes of the family running through effectively. Yet, the element of humanization eliminates the fact that the actual characters are donkeys, mules, and bears. The sitting room, jacket, carrot cake, teapots, along with the illustrations of donkeys walking like people completely wipe away the essence of the characters. Either, the characters could have been humans or the human element could be altered for animal elements, for example,

carrots instead of carrot cake, the actual coat of fur instead of a jacket, and the barn as a setting instead of the sitting room. This would have enhanced the imaginative level of the story.

The second aspect is that of the lost donkey not being found by the family. At the end of the story, the little donkey returns home to find her parents and siblings 'sat in their living room in silence...no one had eaten or slept in two days.' However, it is not mentioned that they had searched high and low for her although considering that she had reached home on her own, she would not have gone very far! Therefore, the writer needed to consider that the theme of familial love could have been more pronounced had the family searched for the lost member and brought her back home rather than the lost one finding her way home while the family 'sat in silence'. The young readers need the lesson that love requires practical action and this story offered an opportunity for this lesson.

Discussion

This study is significant because it brings forward the linguistic analysis of English language storybooks for children which are published in Pakistan and provides their implications on the English language learning of Pakistani students. Also, this study provides suggestions for the improvement of these storybooks. As has been stated in the literature review, research conducted in the local context investigates classroom material, yet does not explicitly focus on material for pleasure reading (Karamouzian, et al., 2011; Tehreem, 2017). As the literature review highlights, ESL classrooms center around the use of the textbook for language learning (Mukundan & Ahour, 2010). This requires the textbooks to facilitate the development of all four language skills. Unfortunately, in Pakistan, the state of textbooks produced has been lamented upon even by the Ministry of Education Pakistan (National Education Policy Review Team, 2006, p. 53). Since it has been affirmed that the textbooks produced in Pakistan are inadequate for the complete language development of the students, we move towards the option of supplementary material. It is proposed that if students read locally produced supplementary material for English language development; although, they would have to incur a lower cost and the context of the stories would be closer to the students' context leading to deeper interest and quicker understanding but the reading material will be substandard.

The results of this study bring forward that the storybooks which were analyzed contain several language-related errors such as: spelling, word repetition, adverb placement, sentence structure, diction, tense punctuation, and word order. Literature has highlighted that reading for pleasure improves the overall language development of the child. If books contain language errors then the reading of such books does not fulfill this purpose. These problems will ultimately have negative effects on the linguistic development of the children. Therefore, instead of positive growth, these issues will lead to a negative impact (Whitten et al., 2016). Although reading for enjoyment is supposed to supplement language learning, vocabulary-building, and reading comprehension, but if these storybooks have errors the effect is negative (Boakye, 2017; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983).

Yet another significant impact of this study is that the results also show that four out of the five storybooks have male protagonists while only one storybook had a female protagonist which is a character of a donkey. Furthermore, specific gender roles were also specified. As the literature review states at every stage of the learning process, learners develop their critical thinking abilities. A lack of balance subtly causes gender inequality in the minds of children since there is an inextricable link between language and thought (Chaffe, 1992). This study is significant in highlighting that books for young children need to be carefully balanced.

The results further show that the storybooks also lack imagery, character, plot, and theme development which does not contribute to the richness of literature. As the literature review highlights that language skills are interlinked which implies that reading leads to writing skills. Thus, if the readers are not provided with stories that contain all or most of the elements of literature, their enjoyment of reading is hampered which might lead to a complete disinterest in reading. This leads to the fact that if in the future, the readers of these storybooks endeavor towards literary writing themselves, their writing will inevitably be lacking in the essential literary elements which have a far-reaching impact on the literary output of a nation. This study emphasizes that children in Pakistan be provided with storybooks that embody exemplary literary practices which will enable them to produce good quality literary writing.

Furthermore, this study is significant in proving that since the storybooks were written for pleasure reading they could have been made more appealing with

attractive illustrations. According to literature, illustrated storybooks provide ample language learning opportunities for young children (Whitehurst et al., 1988).

Overall, according to empirical evidence, reading for pleasure is a supplement to formal reading comprehension (Boakye, 2017) and it improves the overall language proficiency of students (Thorndike, 1973) to the extent that students who read for pleasure were rated higher in academic success (Whitten et al., 2016). The results of this study conclude that English language storybooks produced locally require thorough editing for language errors and require technical refinement.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The storybooks contain several language-related problems such as spelling errors, word repetition, adverb placement, sentence structure, diction, tense punctuation, and word order. Furthermore; specific gender roles were also specified. The storybooks also lack imagery, character, plot, and theme development which does not contribute to the richness of literature. This study concludes that the storybooks require language editing and technical refinement. Since the storybooks were written for pleasure reading they could have been made more appealing with attractive illustrations.

The findings of this study have many implications for English story writers in Pakistan, the following steps are recommended:

- The children's storybooks which are produced in Pakistan need to have intensive proofreading to ensure appropriate and correct language.
- The writers need to consult experienced story writers or take formal story writing sessions if and when available in Pakistan or join online courses on the subject to ensure that literary elements are included in the writing.
- More illustrations will make stories appealing for children.
- A gender balance is essential in the selection of protagonists and variation in gender roles should be considered.

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