

A Model for a Reading Lab for Saudi Students

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Abstract

The Reading Lab provides remedial instructional services to elementary, middle, and high school students who suffer from reading difficulties. It also provides short training courses for regular students at the university level to develop their reading and study skills. When referring students to the reading lab, the lab staff diagnose students' cases and prepare a reading program that suits the student's reading level and reading needs. The lab specialists help teachers in developing reading curricula, choosing appropriate teaching strategies, informing them of new teaching techniques and instructional materials, preparing in-service training courses, and helping them in administering and correcting reading tests and diagnosing students' strengths and weaknesses. They also meet with the parents and visit them at home to give them an idea about the reading program, discuss their children's reading problems, answer their inquiries, and correct some misconceptions. In addition, the reading lab provides training programs for its staff to raise the level of their work efficiency.

Keywords: reading lab, reading problems, reading difficulties, reading skills, reading development

1. Introduction

Many countries around the world show a great interest in teaching reading to students of all levels. One of the manifestations of this interest is the preparation of qualified specialists in teaching reading, such as teachers specialized in reading, reading specialists, reading consultants, reading counselors, specialists in diagnosing reading difficulties, specialists in treating reading difficulties, etc., and providing specialized reading materials for university students such as: methods of teaching reading in the primary stage, methods of teaching reading in the secondary stage, diagnosing and treating reading problems, the psychology of reading, how to construct and administer reading tests, and field training in teaching reading to ordinary, poor and gifted students in the schools, reading clinics and laboratories, establishing research centers and organizations for reading, a publishing dozens of periodicals specializing in reading, and using advanced audio-visual teaching methods to improve students' ability to read. It provides hundreds of standardized and non-standardized aptitude, achievement, and diagnostic reading tests, and finally it provides special programs for ordinary, gifted, poor, and disabled students in reading at all educational levels through reading clinics, reading centers, or reading laboratories.

There has been a great interest in reading laboratories. Hill (1975) reported that 75% of secondary schools in the USA contain a reading center. A third of these centers provide additional educational services in reading, such as individualized instruction for ordinary students and remedial education for weak students. 95% of these centers provide counseling services, 49% provide in-service training programs for teachers, and 37% provide public relations services.

Based on the importance of reading in the learning process, this article describes a model for a reading lab that can be created in universities and schools in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

2. Rationale For Establishing a Reading Lab

The rise in poor readers in the schools. Spache (1981) stated that the percentage of students who are behind in reading is between 15%-25% for the middle-class community. It is between 60%-77% in slums in major cities. In a study by Tawfiq (1961) on 671 male and female students in the fourth grade of primary school, the researcher found that 25% of these students were behind in reading. In another study conducted by Barrada (1974) on 221 male and female students in the third grade of primary school, the researcher found that 27% of these students were behind in reading. In his study by Abdullah (1975) with 649 male and female students in the fourth grade of primary school, he found

that these students suffer from weakness in silent reading, understanding vocabulary, inferencing, and understanding main ideas and details, respectively. The results of a study by Al-Saeed (1981) with 130 students in the second grade of primary school in Riyadh indicated that 10% of the students do not read at all, 10% read a few words, and 17% do not distinguish letters. Al-Qusi and others (1980) found that the problems of students in the fifth and sixth grades of primary school in reading are exhibited in their inability to read for meaning, the inability to properly control the last words, and the inability to understand the ideas presented in the text.

Weak students do not benefit from the teaching method and instructional materials used in the regular classroom, because the traditional method used in teaching reading, which consists of using one reading book and the same teaching method for forty students in a particular classroom cannot succeed in teaching reading to these students. The complex nature of the reading skill requires diagnosing the strengths and weaknesses of each student and then using teaching methods and instructional materials that suit their needs.

The process of preparing remedial exercises for weak students and additional training to develop and apply the reading skills that students have learned, and choosing instructional materials that suit the training and correctional needs of forty students in the class go beyond the limits and capabilities of the average teacher in terms of time and effort. It is possible for the teacher to teach remedial teaching to most students who suffer from simple reading difficulties, but the large number of students in the class and the many responsibilities placed on the teacher limit his/her ability to treat more complex reading difficulties, which necessitates the need for the teacher to resort to an expert to help him/her diagnose the reading weaknesses and design an appropriate remedial reading program. Appropriate treatment, and the use of instructional materials and special training exceed the expertise and abilities of the regular classroom teacher.

There is a wide range of individual differences in reading among students in each grade, especially at the primary level. As indicated by Bond et al. (1984) indicated that the difference between the reading ability of the best pupil and the weakest pupil in the second grade of primary school is two years and five months, three years and six months in the third grade of primary school, four years in the fourth grade, six years and one poetry in the fifth grade, and seven years in the sixth grade. Even when students reach the secondary stage, the reading abilities among students become very different. This requires providing various services to students, according to their level, abilities, and needs, and adapting teaching methods and instructional materials to the students' developmental level. Paying attention to individual differences between students in reading is necessary, because reading skills are fundamental in the modern society. There is a growing interest in the need for developing students' ability to read. Students who are weak in reading are no longer allowed to drop out of school, in addition to the development of teaching methods and instructional materials.

3. Services provided by the reading Lab

Hill (1979) and Wilson (1981) noted that a reading lab provides one or more of the following services:

- Providing additional reading services for students who excel in reading, such as additional instructional materials that meet their needs.
- Providing non-remedial reading services to all students at all levels beyond the primary school, such as short courses in reading and study skills.
- Providing a remedial program to students who have reading problems.
- Providing an entertaining reading program for all students.
- Carrying out reading assessment processes such as supervising the evaluation of reading programs in the school, applying group reading tests to students, identifying students who suffer from reading difficulties or outstanding students, and diagnosing and studying referred cases.

- Assisting teachers in diagnosing students' problems, applying and correcting tests, interpreting the results, setting behavioral goals for reading, informing teachers of the latest research findings and how to benefit from them in the classroom, preparing instructional materials for teachers, bringing them to the classroom and helping them use them.
- Establishing in-service training programs for teachers, which include model lessons, training teachers on regular teaching and remedial teaching, preparing notes on the latest developments in teaching reading and distributing them to teachers, preparing short study units and presenting them to teachers, and informing teachers of effective methods in dealing with weak students.
- Training lab staff.
- Providing public relations services, which include inviting speakers to give lectures, meeting with parents, visiting social organizations, paying home visits, visiting teachers to discuss students' needs, announcing lab services and student test results to students through posters and bulletin boards, meeting with students, distributing information about the lab and its services to officials, deans and directors, and sending reports to parents, teachers, and caregivers, providing statistics on the number of students who have received services from the lab and those who receive lab services, and introducing the efforts made with psychological counselors (Spache, 1981).

4. Organizing the the Reading Lab

The size of the space designated for the reading lab ranges from a single room to a whole building. In the case of using a single room, the room should be far from noise, well-lit and ventilated, and can be used by a large number of teachers and students at the same time. It should be suitable for individual and group teaching.

In terms of furniture, the lab should have a large rectangular or semi-circular tables for group teaching, small cubicles for individual teaching and for watching audio-visual materials in private, mobile blackboards, mobile bulletin boards, cabinets for keeping files, tests, reports, correspondence, college records, interview results, student follow-up records, shelves for displaying books, and others, and for saving games, instructional materials, exercises produced by the teacher, and works produced by the students.

The room should be divided into two parts, one for group teaching and the other for individual and small group teaching. The place designated for group teaching should be located near the board at the front of the lab. Tables and chairs for individual teaching should be placed on the opposite side, leaving an empty space between them to facilitate movement. Tools, devices, and references are placed on the tables.

In the event that a building is allocated for a reading lab, it should include a room for the lab director, rooms for teaching, another room for the secretariat, a room for storing equipment, two or more rooms for teaching small groups, places for individual teaching that can accommodate the largest possible number of students, a room for waiting for parents and visitors, a library for students, and another specialized room for workers in the lab .

5. Instructional materials and Devices

The reading lab contains the following instructional materials and equipment:

- Tests such as: standardized and non-standardized reading tests to measure readiness, achievement, and diagnosis, intelligence tests, tests for measuring interests, attitudes, and personality, placement tests, tests to measure academic delay, and tests to measure auditory and visual ability.
- Books on a variety of topics and levels, with an average of ten books per student.
- Programmed instructional materials.

- Published exercises for general reading, comprehension and word recognition.
- Films, recordings, and reading CDs.
- Slide and still film projectors, overhead projector, dark projector, tape recorders, typewriters, and photocopiers.
- Machines to increase reading speed and others to expand the student's field of vision, such as: Controlled Reading or Pacing devices, Accelerators, Rate Controllers, Tach -X, Hand-Flash-X, Percepts scope, SRA Reading Accelerator, Shadowscope, Borg-Warner System 80 (Kennedy, 1977); McGrinnis & Smith, 1982; Rude & Oehlkers (1984).

6. The Reading Lab Staff

The number of staff working in the reading lab depends on the size of the school or university, and the number of students receiving lab services. The lab staff consist of a lab director, one or more reading specialists, and a number of trained assistants. In addition to these, the lab can have contact with a psychologist, neurologist, social worker, optometrist, and a speech defect specialist.

6.1 The Reading Specialist

Hill (1979) stated that a reading specialist is a trained person who is specialized in reading, fully dedicated to working in the lab, has experience in teaching reading in the schools, and has knowledge of diagnosing and treating reading problems, organizing and managing reading tasks, and different methods for teaching reading and using different instructional materials. He is capable of working with students, teachers, and parents, in addition to having a general preparation in teaching reading at the theoretical and practical levels. He should have studied courses in assessment and measurement, achievement and intelligence tests, case studies, programs for disabled students, adolescent psychology, and counseling and guidance.

Rude & Oehlkers (1984) and Manegrie et al (1982) indicated that the reading specialist performs the following roles:

- Diagnosing students' reading problems, choosing appropriate instructional materials for them, designing reading lessons for them, individualized teaching, teaching small and large groups of students, and following up students.
- Serve as a reference for teachers.
- Participating in educational planning committees for individualized instruction, planning in-service training programs, planning the goals of the reading program, and/or participating in committees for selecting textbooks and tests.
- Working with parents
- Working with other specialists such as learning disability specialist, audiologist, speech pathologist, psychologist, librarian, psychological counselor, doctor, and eye specialist.
- Supervising the training of lab staff.
- Supervising the management of the lab.

6.2 The Assistant Specialist

The paraprofessionals who work in the reading lab are usually selected from graduate students and practicum students. Rude & Oehlkers (1984) defined the tasks performed by the paraprofessional as follows:

- Maintaining collected records.
- Preparing instructional materials.
- Designing tests.
- Preparing instructional materials for groups.
- Monitoring students as individuals.
- Listening to the students while reading aloud.
- Writing meeting announcements.
- Making phone calls to schedule meetings.

- Administering tests.
- Printing reports to be sent to school and parents.
- Preparing orders of books and instructional materials.
- Updating students' records on the computer.

7. The Lab Study Times

Rude & Oehlkers (1984) and Speche (1981) indicated that the length of the reading lab study period depends on the students' academic level, their chronological age, the degree of reading achievement, level of improvement, and their needs. It is preferable for the duration of the classes to be short and the meetings to be many for younger students, and longer durations and fewer meetings for older students. At the university level, it is preferable for students to go to the lab three times a week so that they have the opportunity to practice and apply what they have learned. Students of more than three different grades should not be mixed together. The length of the class session should not exceed 30-40 minutes for primary school students and 45-60 minutes for middle and high school students.

Students may be assisted in the lab immediately after the reading class, may be taken out of mathematics and social science classes to receive remedial instruction in reading. Reading remedial lessons may be given after school or on weekends.

Some laboratories offer additional programs in the summer semester for students who have not made any progress during the school year. The specialist identifies these students and makes the necessary diagnosis for them, and then selects the reading teachers for them. In this case, students can remain in their classes during the school year until they gain the greatest benefit from the class teacher, and all students, whether outstanding, average, or poor, should be given the opportunity to participate in summer programs (Wislon, 1981).

8. The Lab Work System

The primary school reading lab staff work with pupils daily. Three or four staff serve all the poor pupils in a school of 1,000 pupils. In large secondary schools and universities, the specialist may meet with about 5-8 groups of students two or three times a week. Services can also be provided to hundreds of individual students if the lab uses an open-door policy. After the individual or group diagnosis process, the student is given a special program according to his needs and speed. The student uses the program himself, and the lab staff provides him with the necessary guidance. Assuming that the number of working hours in the lab is 35 hours per week, and that the students come to the lab three times a week, the lab can provide its services to 400 students at a rate of 30-40 students per hour, with only three or four employees.

For a lab teaching load, the specialist or his assistant cannot work with 25 children per week individually. In the case of small group teaching, 8 groups (70-80 students) can be taught three times a week for each group. If a full class is being taught, 6-8 groups of 30 students each can be taught.

In addition to teaching, the lab teachers' schedule includes faculty meetings, keeping records, preparing for teaching, preparing instructional materials, talking to teachers, visiting and meeting with parents, applying individual and group diagnostic tests, talking to the body that referred the students, and meeting with the lab specialists.

9. Students Referred to the Reading Lab

The students benefiting from the lab are as follows:

- 1) Outstanding students.
- 2) Ordinary students who wish to improve their reading and study skills in the following areas:

- Increasing their reading speed.
- Vocabulary enrichment.
- Improving comprehension skills.
- Improving note-taking skills from lectures.
- Improving the ability to quickly browse the book.
- Improving the ability to read carefully and carefully.
- Improving exam preparation skills.
- Improving research writing skills.

3) Students who suffer from weakness in one of the following reading abilities:

- Inability to recognize difficult words.
- Inability to convert words into ideas.
- Inability to understand the explicit meaning of written material.
- Inability to interpret the ideas in the text.
- Guessing and skipping while reading.
- Confusing the letters of the alphabet.
- Slow reading.
- Excessive lip movement during silent reading.
- Reading the text word by word instead of reading it in thought groups.
- Mispronouncing words while reading aloud.
- Deleting words or letters while reading aloud.
- Inserting words and letters that are not already present in the text during reading aloud.
- Inverting words or phrases while reading aloud.
- Repeating words with other words during reading aloud.
- Inability to read with good expression meaning while reading aloud.
- Refusing to read.
- Not enjoying reading activities.
- Emotional reactions while reading.
- Unsatisfactory achievement.

4) Students who are behind or disabled in reading, such as:

- A student who has sufficient reading ability that matches his age and grade level, but whose reading achievement is lower than it should be.
- A student who has the opportunity to develop his reading skills, but his inability to read hinders his achievement in other subject courses.
- A student learning disability.

10. Referral Steps

Ekwall & Shanker (1983) outline the steps for transferring students to the reading lab as follows:

- The classroom teacher identifies students who need additional reading services.
- The specialist makes an initial diagnosis of the student.
- The committee decides whether the student can be referred to the reading lab.
- The reading specialist completes the diagnosis process and examines the student's hearing and vision exams.
- Choosing the appropriate program for the student.
- After several weeks of the student's enrollment in the treatment program, the student's progress should be assessed. If the student improves, he should be returned to class, and if he does not improve, he should be referred to other specialists, such as a psychologist, to treat emotional and other problems.

11. Steps of Establishing a Reading Lab

Implementing a project to establish a reading lab requires that both officials, and faculty members at the school or university are convinced of the importance of establishing a reading lab. Before establishing the lab, it is necessary to prepare a series of newspaper articles or publish a book that focuses on the topic and leads to a reconsideration of current practices in teaching reading. Teachers should also be involved in discussions that deepen their understanding of the reading process and how to develop reading skills, and make them feel the need for this project.

Hill (1979) indicated the necessity of starting an orientation program to inform teachers of the objectives of the first phase of the reading lab project, which are to create a positive atmosphere, assess needs and priorities, develop a general plan for the project, and determine initial steps for operating the reading lab. During the warm-up period, the following should be done:

- Increasing the number of faculty members interested in the reading lab project.
- Involving the administration in the project.
- Forming an initial committee for the reading program.
- Setting initial goals for the work.
- Assessing students' reading needs.
- Identifying the resources available in the school.
- Developing an initial plan for project implementation.

The project implementation phase includes: forming a permanent reading committee, providing the necessary number of employees, planning an in-service training program, preparing a guide for the program to be used in the reading lab, providing the required instructional materials and reading resources, planning an appropriate schedule, and beginning to provide the lab services to those who need them in order of priority.

When selecting employees, it is necessary to choose people with diverse competencies, such as those who have experience in teaching, some trained in diagnostic procedures, and others trained in psychological treatment methods. If qualified teachers are not available, counselors can help.

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When selecting employees, it is necessary to choose people with diverse competencies, who have experience in teaching, some of whom must be trained in diagnostic procedures, and others trained in psychological treatment methods. In the event that qualified teachers are not available, psychological counselors, social workers, and psychologists can assume the task of teaching weak students (part-time), and graduate students, parent volunteers, and teachers can be used. Before starting to work in the lab, they must be trained in diagnostic and treatment processes, applying tests, teaching students, making home visits, meeting with parents and teachers by holding special training courses, studying subjects at the university, or inviting specialists to give some lectures.

Finally, it is necessary to conduct objective periodic evaluations of the progress of work in the reading lab. The evaluation should cover the curricula, teaching methods, and instructional materials used in the lab, the extent to which students are benefitting from the reading lab, the method of organizing and managing the lab, and the adequacy of employees, their training, and their performance.

12. Conclusion

Improving the process of teaching and learning reading is necessary because reading is one of the most important skills that schools teaches to students. Mastering reading skills is essential for students' success, not only in reading, but in all academic subjects. The reading lab, with its instructional materials, audio-visual equipment specialized in teaching reading, and qualified specialists who are trained in developing reading skills and diagnosing and treating reading problems of all kinds can provide many services to outstanding, average and poor students in reading, and services to teachers inside the school and to parents outside it in order to function properly. Everyone should strive to develop students' reading abilities to the greatest extent possible.

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