TEACHING ENGLISH LANGUAGE READING SKILLS TO STUDENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION PILOT PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

The present paper will present the results of my pilot project, which is a part of my larger doctoral work. The project involves identifying the needs of 32 students in the experimental group and 31in the control group from among the first year students of English specialty at the Samarkand State University in Samarkand, Uzbekistan, for the improvement of their reading skill. The current level of reading proficiency of both the groups was identified through a diagnostic test. Subsequently, students in the experimental group were trained for a semester through a specially prepared interactive manual. After the semester, the students of both the groups were again tested for their reading proficiency. The aim is to find out whether students, when consciously trained for reading, do improve their reading skills in contrast to the students trained in the traditional way. The paper highlights some important strategies that are necessary for the improvement of reading skills.

Ushbu maqola mening katta doktorlik ishimning bir qismi bo'lgan pilot loyihamning natijalarini taqdim etadi. Loyiha Samarqand davlat universitetining ingliz tili mutaxassisligi bo'yicha 1-kurs talabalari orasidan eksperimental guruhdagi 32 nafar va nazorat guruhidagi 31 nafar talabaning o'qish malakasini oshirishga bo'lgan ehtiyojini aniqlashdan iborat. Ikkala guruhning o'qish malakasining hozirgi darajasi diagnostik test orqali aniqlandi. Keyinchalik eksperimental guruh talabalari maxsus tayyorlangan interfaol qo'llanma orqali bir semestr davomida o'qitildi. Semestrdan so'ng har ikki guruh talabalari o'qish malakalari yana bir bor sinovdan o'tkazildi. Maqsad, talabalar ongli ravishda o'qishga o'rgatilganda, an'anaviy tarzda o'qitilgan talabalardan farqli o'laroq, o'qish qobiliyatlarini yaxshilaydimi yoki yo'qligini aniqlashdir. Maqolada o'qish ko'nikmalarini yaxshilash uchun zarur bo'lgan ba'zi muhim strategiyalar ta'kidlangan.

В данной статье будут представлены результаты моего пилотного проекта, который является частью моей более крупной докторской работы. Проект предполагает выявление потребностей 32 студентов экспериментальной группы и 31 студента контрольной группы из числа студентов первого курса английской специальности Самаркандского государственного университета в Самарканде, Узбекистан, в улучшении их навыков чтения. Текущий уровень навыков чтения в обеих группах был определен с помощью диагностического теста. Впоследствии студенты экспериментальной группы обучались в течение семестра по специально подготовленному интерактивному пособию. По окончании семестра ученики обеих групп снова прошли проверку на умение читать. Цель состоит в том, чтобы выяснить, действительно ли учащиеся, сознательно обученные чтению, улучшают свои навыки чтения в отличие от учащихся, обучаемых традиционным способом. В документе освещаются некоторые важные стратегии, необходимые для улучшения навыков чтения.

Keywords: Foreign language, integrated skills, reading skills

INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the important English language skills which need to be mastered by the students. Reading skills are essential for students in acquiring knowledge and new information of what they read. According to Brown, reading is the most important skill in the educational context as it can lead to the assessments of students' general language ability (Brown, 2007, p. 185). Reading comprehension is one aspect of language skills that must be mastered by the student. To be able to interpret and absorb information from reading material, students should have a good ability of comprehension. Reading comprehension is required in each subject, since each lesson is inseparable from the act of reading. Therefore, students are required to have a good ability for understanding written texts.

Reading is a passive skill which requires interactive process in comprehending the meaning in order to get information or ideas from written text. Understanding the meaning of reading skill, including the ability of reading, views of experts who have different points of view, are definitely important for the teacher of reading. It is useful to conduct reading lessons in the classroom and to know opinions about how to enhance reading skills. Some definitions about reading are the following:

1. Nunan (1999) states that reading is generally viewed as a passive skill, and it involves the processing of the generated ideas by others that are transmitted through language.

2. Eskey and Dubin (1986:12) state that reading is a receptive language process. This is a process in which readers try to get more information from what is encoded by the author in the text in order to construct meaning from the text they read. It can be understood that there is an interaction between the reader and a text in the reading process.

3. Alyousef (2006:64) states that reading can be seen as an "interactive" process between a reader and a text which leads to automaticity of reading (reading fluency).

4. Harmer (1983) states that reading is not a passive skill, rather it is an active activity. It involves many skills such as guessing, predicting, checking, and asking oneself questions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of reading in L2

"Where there is little reading there will be little language learning.... the student who wants to learn English will have to read himself into a knowledge of it unless he can move into an English environment" (Bright and McGregor, 1970, p.52). From this description one can see that, reading is significant while learning an L2. People can feel real English environment through reading.

In the recent theoretical approach, practice-based learning is considered important rather than grammar-based approach. This practice covers training of all four basic skills- listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Practicing these four skills together can only lead to success of the teaching of English. Among the major skills, teaching of reading has a significant place and it is still very important for higher education. Teaching of reading is not easy so it needs special attention from the experts and professionals for a meaningful higher education in the country. English is the number one library language of the world, since vast majority of world's library resources are in English, and the biggest publishing industries of the world also publish books in English. Therefore, without the reading skill of English, it is quite impossible to pursue meaningful and effective higher education in most parts of the world.

It is also considered that reading skills of English is very important for higher education in Uzbekistan. Moreover, today's world is becoming increasingly globalized; a graduate is produced today not only for the local, but for the global market. So, graduates should have education of an international standard which is not at all possible without the reading skills of

English. This is also an age of Internet, and it is the best and swiftest medium of getting information and of being acquainted with the world. As the language of Internet is English, a fair level of reading skill in English is necessary to use or browse Internet. Reading is, therefore, a very important English language skill that we need in this present competitive world. Reading is also necessary to know the answers to a particular question or issue for which someone reads. To satisfy one's thirst for knowledge, reading books is necessary, and most of the books are in English. This being the reality of the present world, teaching of the reading skills of English is very important for Uzbekistan, and it has no alternative.

METHODOLOGY

This study focuses on the learning and teaching of Reading in English as a Foreign Language (REFL) in Uzbekistan. The study draws on qualitative as well as quantitative research methods using questionnaires. Arsenault and Anderson (1998) define qualitative research as 'a form of inquiry that explores phenomena in their natural settings and uses multi-methods to interpret, understand, explain and bring meaning to them'. Bradley (1997, p.31) adds that qualitative research is one of the best methods 'for the collection, analysis and interpretation of data on phenomena that are not easily reduced to numbers'. One aim of this study is to investigate how the EFL reader interacted with an English reading text. I prefer to use these research methods because they allow me to understand the problems of reading comprehension and to identify the strategies used while reading.

Quantitative research is defined as a systematic investigation of phenomena by gathering quantifiable data and performing statistical, mathematical, or computational techniques. Quantitative research collects information from existing and potential customers using sampling methods and sending out online surveys, online polls, questionnaires, etc., the results of which can be depicted in the form of numericals (QuestionPro) and their interpretation.

DATA COLLECTION AND CODIFICATION

To conduct my PhD work, a pilot project has been carried out. The data was collected in the class of the first year students of the Philology faculty of Samarkand State University where English teaching and learning has always been the center of attention. The students who are in English major were between 18-20 years of age and have come from different regions of Uzbekistan with different levels of education. To experiment for my research work, I taught reading as a second language from the beginning of the second semester in 2020-2021 academic year. The pilot project lasted from March till late June with 15 lessons (30 teaching hours) from the booklet which was designed for improving the reading skills of the students. On the basis of scores on a pre-test of reading proficiency in English, 55 students were divided into two groups of similar reading ability; 29 students for a Control group and 26 students for an Experimental group. The pre-test was given before the beginning teaching REFL and the post-test was given at the end of the course. While analyzing the number of students equaled to 100%.

The questionnaires were administered to find out the students' background and explore their reading skills. The questionnaire consists of seven parts:

(1) 20 factual questions to investigate the students' background characteristics such as place of birth, the parents' professions and students' educational experience;
(2) and (3) has 20 questions about their attitude to English and reading;
(4) there were 4 questions which check students' reading and listening skills;
(5) this section has 3 questions which students should answer orally after reading the text;

(6) Students are given a passage of 180 words and were asked to write a summary in around 50 words;

(7) Reading comprehension questions are given.

The data was coded with numbers and letters. Questions are coded with numbers (1-20) and answers with letters (a-e), First Questionnaire which was taken in the beginning of the pilot project was coded Test 1 and Test 2 is for Final Questionnaire. From Part I to Part VII was given to every section in the Questionnaire.

The manual that is designed to improve the students reading skills consists of 15 lessons with different texts about various topics to keep readers engaged in reading. As the students are at their first academic year, texts with intermediate level were chosen. Every lesson has pre-reading and post-reading exercises to make students work with the text deeply and widely. There are reading and speaking, Reading and writing and reading comprehension tasks which are aimed at enhancing the reader's integrated skills. Although listening tasks was missing, during the process of discussion and answering questions, the students were able to listen to others.

DATA ANALYSIS

To analyze the data from the tests in the beginning and the end of the semester for the Control and Experimental group, the following sets of comparisons were made;

1. Average score of the tests in the beginning and the end of the semester for the Control group;
2. Average score of the tests in the beginning and the end of the semester for the Experimental group;
3. A comparison of average scores obtained by the Control groups and the Experimental group in the test in the beginning of the semester;
4. A comparison of average scores obtained by the Control groups and the Experimental group in the test at the end of the semester;
5. Average score or the Control group for the tests of Reading and Listening, Reading-speaking Reading-writing, and reading comprehension in the beginning of the semester;
6. Average score or the Control group for the tests of Reading and Listening, Reading-speaking Reading-writing, and reading comprehension at the end of the semester;
7. Average score or the Experimental group for the tests of Reading and Listening, Reading-speaking Reading-writing, and reading comprehension in the beginning of the semester;
8. Average score or the Experimental group for the tests of Reading and Listening, Reading-speaking Reading-writing, and reading comprehension at the end of the semester;
9. test scores of students in the Control group from urban and rural areas obtained in the test in the beginning of the semester;
10. Average test scores of students in the Control group from urban and rural areas obtained in the test at the end of the semester;
11. Average test scores of students in the Experimental group from urban and rural areas obtained in the test in the beginning of the semester;
12. Average test scores of the students in the Experimental group from urban and rural areas obtained in the test at the end of the semester.
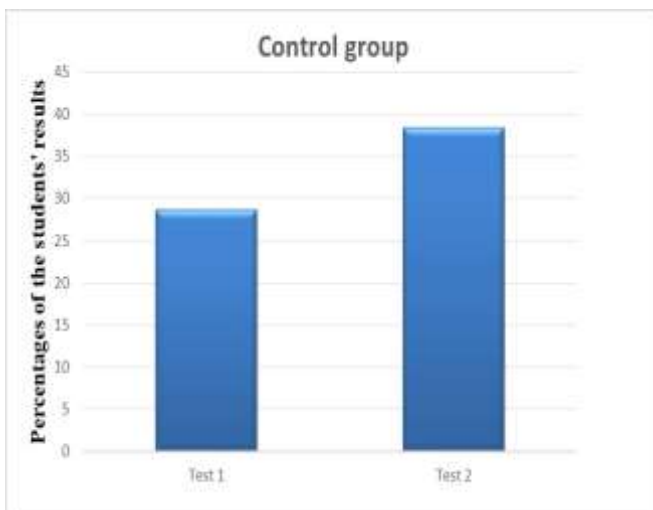
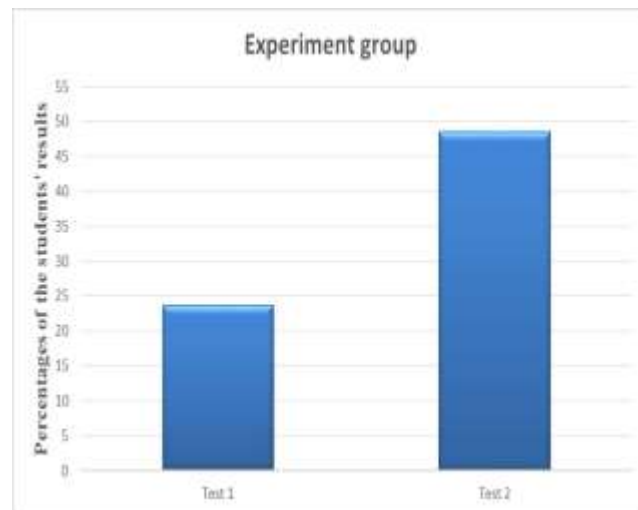Diagram 1   Diagram 2

According to the diagram 1, the average score of the test of the Control group in the beginning of the semester was 28, 5 % and at the end of the semester it was 38, 2 % with about 10 % rise during the semester.

It can be seen from the Diagram 2, the average score of the test of the Experimental group in the beginning of the semester was 23, 7 % and at the end of the semester it was 48, 4 %, with about 25 % rise during the semester.

The average scores obtained from the test in the beginning of the semester for Control group was 28, 5 % which was almost 5 % higher from the Experimental group. (Diagram 3)

However, after the pilot project was conducted the students from the Experimental groups' reading skills improved significantly with 20 % higher than the Control group whose score was 38, 2 %.(Diagram 4)
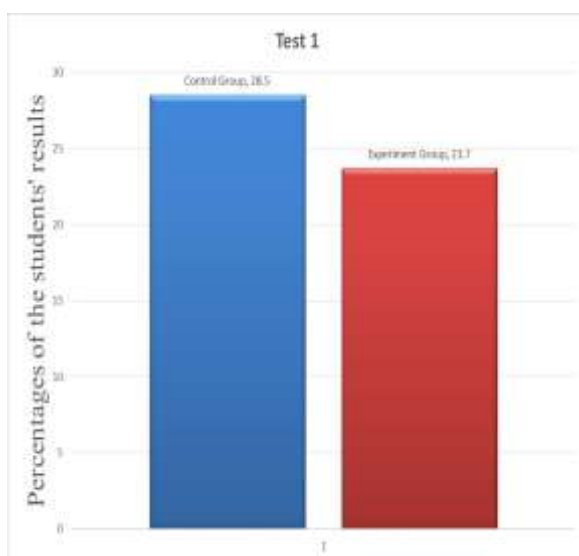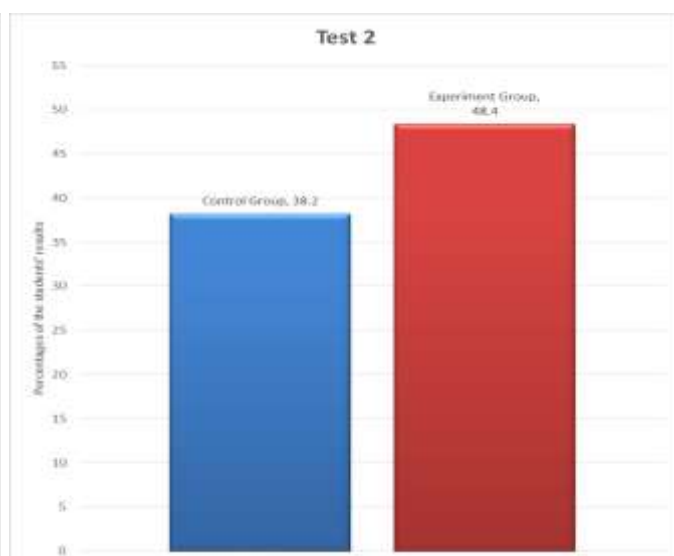
Diagram 3   Diagram 4
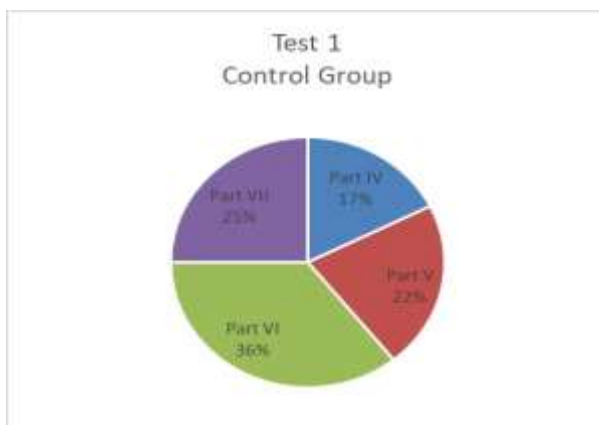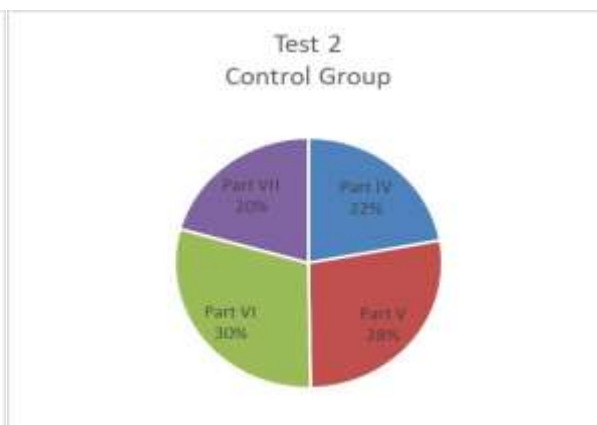
Diagram 5   Diagram 6

Diagrams 5, 6, 7, and 8 compare the differences between Part IV, Part V, Part VI and Part VII in Test 1 and Test 2 which tested the students' reading skills with other skills such as listening, speaking and writing.

To compare the Diagram 5 with the Diagram 6, students from Control group' scores obtained from Part IV (Reading and Listening) was the lowest, 17 % in the beginning of the semester, while this changed to 22 % at the end of the semester. There was a rise in Part V (Reading and Speaking) 22 % in the beginning of the semester and 28 % at the end of the semester. The highest score for Part VI remained in both tests, with 36 % in the beginning of the semester and 30 % at the end of the semester. However, at the end of the semester the lowest score obtained was Part VII (Reading comprehension) 20 % which was 25 % in Test 1.
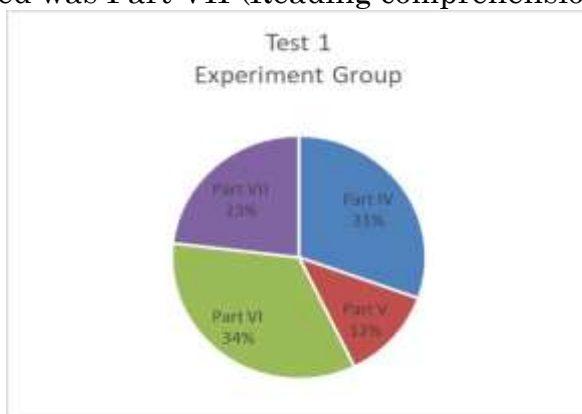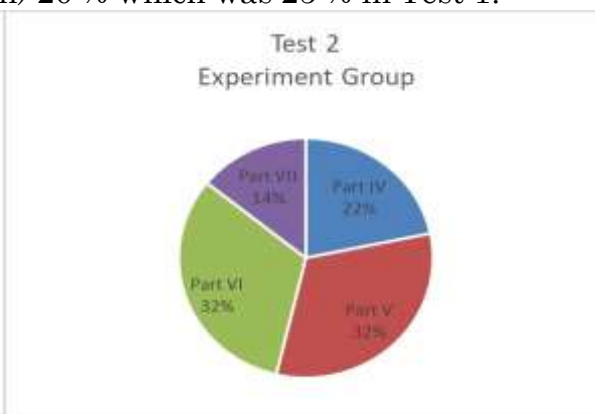

Diagram 7   Diagram 8

The Diagram 7 and the Diagram 8 compare the Experimental group's scores obtained in tests of Reading and Listening, Reading-speaking Reading-writing, and reading comprehension in the beginning of the semester and at the end of the semester. In the Test 1 the highest score was for Part VI 34 %, which became 2 % less in the Test 2. However, scores obtained from Part V increased considerably from 12 % in the beginning of the semester to 32 % at the end of the semester, with 20 % rise. The score for Part VII in the beginning of the semester was 23% and at the end of the semester became less to 14 %. This decline can be seen in the Part IV too. Students score obtained were 31 % in the beginning of the semester and 22 % at the end of the semester.

The students in this university come from different parts of Uzbekistan, as mentioned earlier, and their social, economic and educational background are analyzed. In the data analysis we are looking at the urban and rural parameters have any relationship with the acquisition of English language of the students. This is because it is generally believed that students from

urban areas are better learners of English. However, students from urban areas showed higher results in tests in the beginning and at the end of the semester.
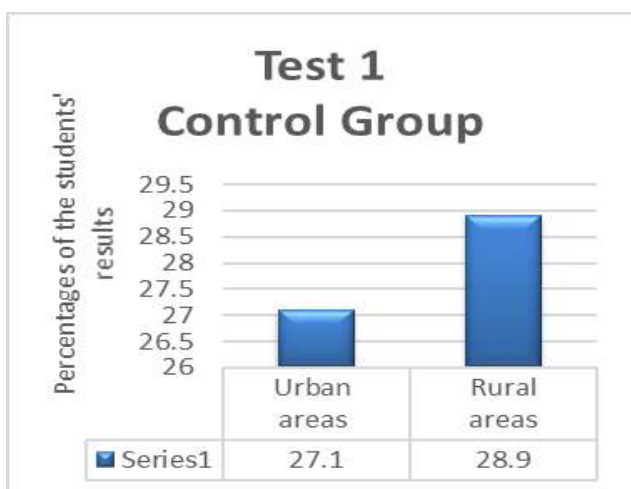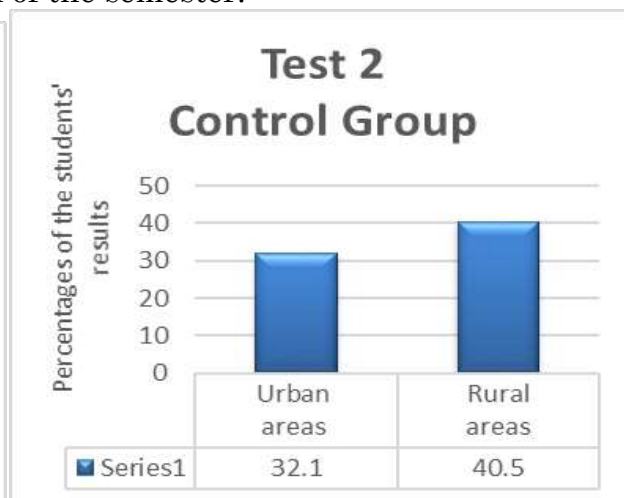

Diagram 9   Diagram 10

There were 7 students from urban areas and 19 students from rural areas in the Control group. The average test score of the students from rural score was higher than students from urban areas in the beginning and at the end of the semester.

There were 8 students from urban areas and 21 students from rural areas in the Experimental group. This trend can be seen in this group too. The average test score of the students from rural score was higher than students from urban areas in the beginning and at the end of the semester.
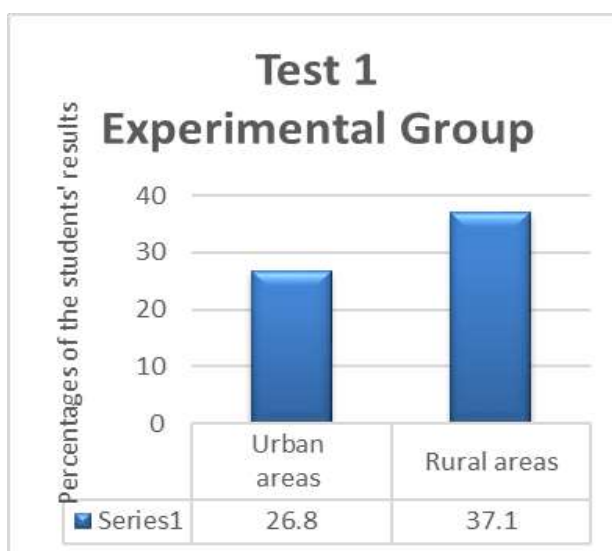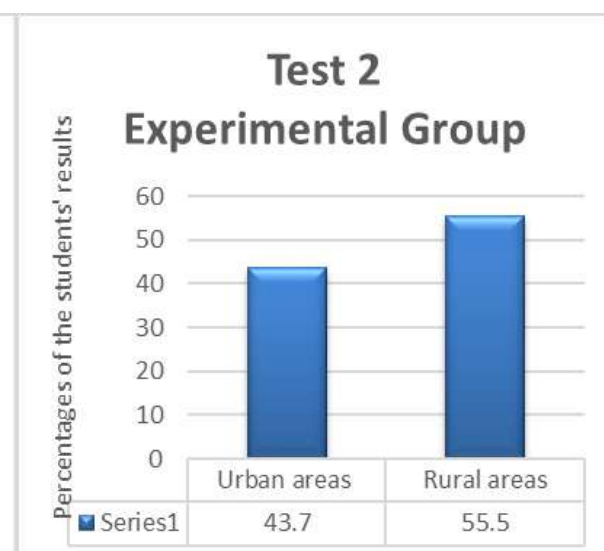

Diagram 11   Diagram 12

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have described the importance of reading skills in a foreign language and analyzed the pilot project of my PhD dissertation. The findings from the Questionnaire suggest that the participants in the Experimental group their reading skills after 15 lessons which were taught to improve the students reading skills in a second language. The data also revealed that the students from rural areas in both groups performed better rather than the students from urban areas.

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