

## Advancing English Reading Proficiency

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**Abstract:** Reading comprehension, in its proper context, is fundamental to the acquisition of knowledge, which is the basis not only for performing well in exams but also for research in all disciplines of higher education. In order to study the improvement of reading skills in English, an experiment was conducted with first years students from the following three higher educational institutions in Samarkand: 1. Samarkand State University (SamSU), 2. Samarkand-Finland Institute of Pedagogy (SamFIP), and 3. Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages (SamSIFL). Control groups and experimental groups were separately identified in each of the institutions based on a rough similarity of academic backgrounds of participating students. The initial data was collected in the following semesters: from SamSU in the session that began in March of 2021, from SamFIP in the session beginning in September 2021, and from SamSIFL in the session that commences in March 2022. While the control groups consisted of 29 students in SamSU, 30 in SamFIP, and 18 in SamIFL, the experimental groups consisted of 26 students in SamSU, 30 in SamFIP, and 18 in SamIFL. Right in the beginning of their respective semesters a reading-based proficiency test was administered to both the control and experimental groups simultaneously. For a semester, efforts were made to improve the reading skills of students with the help of a specially prepared manual. At the end of their respective semesters the control groups and the experimental groups were again tested by administering a relatively higher-level reading-based test. The findings reveal that a careful focus on the development of reading skills among the students leads to a much better academic performance. The experimental data and the findings will be presented in the conference.

**Key words:** English, reading, development, teaching, research

### Introduction

Reading is extremely essential in the domain of higher education. Reading involves not only deciphering the written word but also understanding and interpreting it in the right context. It is fundamental for the acquisition of knowledge which is the basis of all research in higher education. Along with this it also enables students to express themselves well in their examinations as well as in writing their assignments and term papers etc. In order to investigate the teaching of reading skills, it is important to know not only reading and its various dimensions but also to know the problems that students face during the act of reading.

In the context of children, Alan (2011, p. 37) says, "Reading is the most important skill a child can develop, learning to read is an important skill every child must develop to be successful in school". He believes that regardless of the subject matter taught, a child must be able to read and comprehend what they are reading, i.e., "Good reading skills are the foundation for a proper education" (Alan, 2011, p.5). What Allen says about reading skills in relation to children is also true for foreign or second language learning adults in the context of higher education, since their immediate future may depend on these skills. Further, many other studies such as (Chen, 2003; Fuchs, et al., 2002; Li, 2004; Yang & Hung, 2008; Abu Shamlah 2010, Al Udaini (2011), Habboush (2010), Kaya (2015), and Benson(2021) . have proved that there is a strong correlation between reading comprehension skills and academic success.

Reading ability is a key factor, though often an overlooked skill, that is vital not only for academic and professional success (*cf.* Strydom, 1997; Pretorius, 2001) but also for enhancing ones knowledge and personality.

### Literature Review

### **Reading in the context of second language**

Reading in L2 differs from reading in L1. Readers use their background knowledge as well as their native language reading experience while reading in a foreign language. From 1970s researchers like Smith and Goodman began paying attention to L2 reading from a psycholinguistic point of view (1970, 15,127).

The psycholinguistic perspective focuses on language acquisition function of the mind. In relation to this Grabe states that as in L1, L2 reading also requires both **lower-level** and **higher-level** processes, as well as **systematic knowledge interaction** (2009 “Reading in a Second Language” 21; “Key Issues” 9). While lower-level processes involve visual recognition of phonological, orthographic, lexical, grammatical and semantic information, higher-level processes refer to cognitive functions that take care of unfamiliar information etc. by modifying one’s reading with the help of prior information that is stored in one’s long-term memory.

Reading is a complex process which involves many different sub-skills. It contains a complex combination and integration of a variety of cognitive, linguistic and non-linguistic skills ranging from the very basic low-level processes to high-level processes. Low-level processes involves encoding visual configuration (graphic signs - printed or scripted) and then decoding what the printed or scripted material. High-level processes involve higher-order knowledge of text representation and integration of ideas which are studied in terms of organizational levels like syntax, semantics, and discourse which also need the context of a readers’ global knowledge of language structures and language functions. These two processes are fundamental to all reading, irrespective of the fact that it relates to reading in first or second language (L1 or L2) or even a foreign language. (Hossein Nassaji, 2003).

### **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 observation one can say that, reading is significant for the learning/acquisition of L2.

In contemporary approaches to language learning, practice-based learning in real life-like circumstances is considered to be the important rather than teaching/learning merely through a grammar-based approach. This practice simultaneously covers all the four basic skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Only practicing these four skills in unison can only lead to success in the teaching/ learning of English. Among the language skills, the teaching of reading has a significant place and it is 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. Today, English is the foremost library language of the world since a vast majority of world’s library resources are in English, and the biggest publishing industries of the world publish books in English. Therefore, without proper reading skills in English it would be quite impossible to pursue higher education meaningfully and effectively.

### **The Correlation between Reading and Other Language Skills**

Reading is a key factor in language learning. Bright and McGregor are of the opinion that reading is ‘the most pleasant route to command of the language’, because it is via reading ‘the student is most likely to find words used memorably with force and point.’(1970, p.53). In fact, according to Rasu (2019), reading is a skill that must be taught in an integrated way, i.e, the teaching of reading must not be separated from listening, speaking and writing skills in communication. By focusing on reading, let us look, theoretically, at its relationship with the other three language skills.

### **Relationship between Reading and Writing skills**

Reading and writing are believed to be complementary skills today. Till the 1970’s reading and writing were regarded separate skills. It is the 1980s that reading and writing began to viewed as sharing similar cognitive processes. By the 1990s, reading was no longer viewed as prior to writing, but began to be viewed as partners in the co-construction of meaning (Hirvela, 2004).

Reading and writing are social and educational acts that are quite interdependent. While reading helps in obtaining information, writing in contrast is a way of sharing information and ideas with others. share our ideas. People who read extensively also learn the strategies employed in good writing and hence generally also have writing skills. Stotsky (1983) was perhaps one of the first to stress the reciprocal relationship between the two skills - that reading activity can serve as input for writing, and writing can lead a student to further his/her reading resources.

The relationship between reading and writing is related to what the reader has learned when the process of reading is finished. This means that the the reading of different texts helps in providing a student with different models to chose from for writing. Students who can read well are able to locate or identify the most relevant information in the source text, and they can then turn it into their writing.

Two elements that are common to both reading and writing are the knowledge of vocabulary (meaning of words in contexts) and the syntax (structure of sentences). The type of the reading material to which students are exposed influence their writing style and vocabulary.

Extensive reading develops writing abilities by offering the student with a wide range of subject related vocabulary and ideas, which in turn helps the student to write an article or assignment related to the same subject. Further, reading develops thought process and imagination which is the extremely significant for any sensible writing.

Reading involves two factors, comprehension of the subject matter, and the memory to retain the material read, both of which are components of the learning process. In fact, a lot of studies have even suggested that writing skills improve from reading as a whole, rather than from the separate learning of language and grammar. These days even a small bit of writing, like making a business presentation, often requires research skills that involve a lot of reading.

It is a fact that reading improves writing, but at the same time writing tasks help students in their reading comprehension by understanding vocabulary in their proper contexts.

### **Relationship between Reading and Speaking skills**

There is also a considerably relationship between reading and speaking skills. They appear to be different because reading is a receptive skill and speaking is a productive one, and also reading employs visual-tactile sense while speaking employs the oral phenomenon along with the auditory sense. Despite such apparent difference there is a significant relationship between the two skills. Reading does have an important effect on speaking. Our speaking intelligently is directly related to the information and the ways of expression that we find in reading.

It is clear that speaking is central to communication, as well it is central to the communicative approach to language learning. The only way to improve speaking in English is to rely on reading, i.e., reading appropriate materials will help in improving spoken communication skills of a student of English.

Reading allows students to decipher new words that they need for communication or to use and share ideas that they met in a text or in a certain conversation. So, it is through reading that students can develop the vocabulary which they can use in different communicative situations. Reading can be regarded as a kind of input provider in the process of speaking. It provides the student with the necessary models, vocabulary, ideas, formats of conversations or dialogues with suitable expressions that he/she may use in different communicative contexts or speech acts.

At times students are made to read loudly together, a form of choral reading, which is one of the ways to improve pronunciation and speaking. Reading aloud short phrases or sentences can lead to improvement in fluency of speech. Also, in a class, reading can be used for asking questions from the passage or lesson read to which students need to answer orally. Students may also be asked to make questions on the contents of the text read, or they may even be asked to give their opinion about the facts in the lesson. At times they also be asked to act out the role of a character, particularly in a drama text, or be made to describe a character and give an opinion about him/her. Such activities relate reading to speaking. The reading-speaking interaction between the teacher and the students provides the teacher with valuable feed-back about the extent to which the students comprehend the lesson or text.

In brief, through careful observations in the reading process, students can learn to use and speak language by using appropriate vocabulary and phrases etc. In their proper contexts. Students who read much will surely be in a position to speak well. At times some students may develop the tendency of articulating words as they are spelled and not as they are spoken by native speakers. This can only be remedied if reading is also supplemented by listening.

### **Relationship between reading and listening skills**

Reading and Listening, both are 'receptive' skills that apparently require initially a passive involvement which then is actively converted to obtaining and making of meaning. Both are related due to their similarity of functioning, i.e., initially they need to comprehend the message read or listened, and then, using their world-

view, they may further interpret the message comprehended. This is what happens in the case of, say, in the reading of a poem or in the listening of recitation of a poem.

The reader and listeners are not merely passive recipients of messages, they, in fact, actively interact with the text/discourse for the co-creation of meaning. It may be said that reading and listening are related in such a way that improvement in one automatically brings improvement in the other too.

The mutual relationship between reading and listening can be exemplified by taking the example of children who in their childhood listen to stories etc. Later on they may read the same stories. This creates a connection between what was heard and what is read. In the same way, for learning English, students must first be introduced to listening and then to speaking. This will enable them to read meaningfully what they already know.

In the domain of activities, reading becomes more effective if it is preceded by some listening exercise about the topic that will be read. This will not only provide prior information but will also help the students to pronounce words and expressions with proper stress and intonation patterns when they read the text.

The manual which was designed to teach English reading skills to 1<sup>st</sup> year students consists of some listening activities which precede reading passages to help students to comprehend reading better.

### **How does reading comprehension develop?**

As it has been said, reading comprehension is incredibly complex and multifaceted. Because of complexity, readers cannot develop the ability to comprehend texts quickly, easily or independently. Knowledgeable and experienced teachers must teach reading comprehension strategies over an extended period of time. It might seem that once a student learns to read in the elementary grades he is able to tackle any future text that comes his way. This is not true. Reading comprehension strategies must be refined, practiced and reinforced continually throughout life. Teachers need to continue to help their learners develop reading comprehension strategies as their reading materials become more diverse and challenging, students need to learn new tools for comprehending these texts. Content area materials such as textbooks and newspaper, magazine and journal articles pose different reading comprehension challenges for young people and thus require different comprehension strategies. The development of reading comprehension is a lifelong process that changes based on the depth and breadth of texts the person is reading (K12Reader).

My PhD title is teaching English reading skills to the students of higher education, so I need also to state out what is teaching.

Teaching does not only consist of teachers but also students. It includes developing students' knowledge as well as assessing their skills so that a teacher can measure the progress of their students in the teaching process. Designing, content selection, delivery, assessment and reflection are main part of the teaching. A teacher plans a lesson beforehand taking into consideration their students' age, abilities, needs and learning strategies. S/he also selects an appropriate content for the class thinking of how to deliver a new theme to their students. After explaining or giving the knowledge, they check the students' understandings by different activities/ways which we call it assessment. In the reflection part, a teacher evaluates their classes; their progress and the problems that need to be worked out. Thus teaching does not only mean transmitting information but also engaging students to the class and assess them.

### **METHODOLOGY**

A pilot project was carried out to conduct my PhD work. The data was collected from first-year students of the Philology faculty at Samarkand State University, where English teaching and learning has always been a focal point. The students in the English major were between 18 and 20 years old and came from different regions of Uzbekistan with varying levels of education. To experiment for my research work, I taught reading as a second language from the beginning of the second semester in the 2020-2021 academic year. The pilot project lasted from March until late June with 15 lessons (30 teaching hours) from a booklet designed to improve the reading skills of the students. Based on their scores on a pre-test of reading proficiency in English, 50 students were divided into two groups with similar reading abilities: a Control group and an Experimental group. The pre-test was given before teaching REFL began, and the post-test was given at the end of the course.

The questionnaires were administered to determine the students' backgrounds 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, parents' professions, and students' educational experience; (2) and (3),

which have 20 questions about their attitudes toward English and reading; (4) four questions that check students' reading and listening skills; (5) this section has three questions that students should answer orally after reading the text; (6) students are given a passage of 180 words and asked to write a summary in around 50 words; and (7) reading comprehension questions are provided.

The data was encoded using numbers and letters. The questions were assigned numerical codes (1-20) and the answers were assigned letter codes (a-e). The initial questionnaire administered at the beginning of the pilot project was labeled Test 1, while the final questionnaire was labeled Test 2.

The manual designed to improve students' reading skills consists of 15 lessons, each with different texts on various topics to keep readers engaged. Since the students are in their first academic year, intermediate-level texts were chosen. Each lesson includes pre-reading and post-reading exercises to encourage students to engage deeply and broadly with the text. The tasks include reading and speaking, reading and writing, and reading comprehension, all aimed at enhancing readers' integrated skills.

### **Data and data analysis**

The research involves quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data was collected by calculating the mean of the students' scores in the pre-test and post-test. The qualitative data was obtained from the questionnaire administered to the students at the beginning of the research.

1. Pope's An Essay on Man is based on the ideas of :

- (A) Lord Petrie (B) Theobald  
(C) Lord Bolingbroke (D) Lord Harvey

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Data was collected from three educational institutes in Samarkand. The pilot project was conducted at Samarkand State University during the spring semester of 2021, from March to June. The larger project was carried out in the remaining two institutes during the academic years of 2021-2022. Following analysis of the data collected during the pilot project, revisions were made to the English reading skills teaching manual and questionnaire.

Data was collected for the big project from the students of Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages and Uzbekistan Finn Pedagogical Institute. Each educational institute had experiment and control groups. The experiment group in Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages had 19 students while the control group had 20 students. In Samarkand Finn Institute of Pedagogy, the experiment group had 20 students and the control group had 20 students.

One semester was dedicated to each data collection and teaching procedure. Data was collected during the winter semester of 2021 from a project conducted with the Uzbekistan Finn Pedagogical Institute, and during the spring semester of 2022 from the Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages. A pre-test was administered at the beginning of the teaching procedure, and a post-test was given at the end of the project for both institutes.

### **Details of the first test**

The pre-test (Test 1) was administered to students at both the Uzbekistan Finn Pedagogical Institute in October 2021 and the Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages in March 2022. The pre-test was given to both control and experimental groups at each institute prior to instruction in English reading skills. The questionnaire and pre-test were administered online, with a limited amount of time given for completion. The test consists of four parts. In Part IV, students' listening and reading skills are evaluated. Students listen to an audio recording of a text and select the correct answer for each question. They have the opportunity to listen to the audio twice, and the time limit for this part is 10 minutes.

In the second part of the test (Part V), reading and speaking skills are assessed. In this section, students read a given text online and answer questions related to it by recording their answers. 25 minutes is allotted for this part.

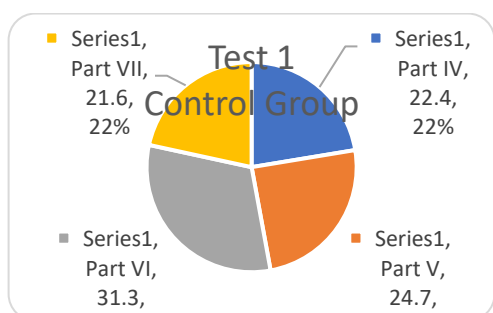
Part VI assesses reading and writing skills wherein students read a text and answer questions in their own words without copying sentences from the text. Again, 25 minutes is given for this part.

Part VII checks the students' reading comprehension skills. After reading a given text, students choose the correct answers to the questions that follow. Another 25 minutes is provided for this part.

### Tests in Uzbekistan Finn Pedagogical Institute - explaining the details of the table-generalization /finding

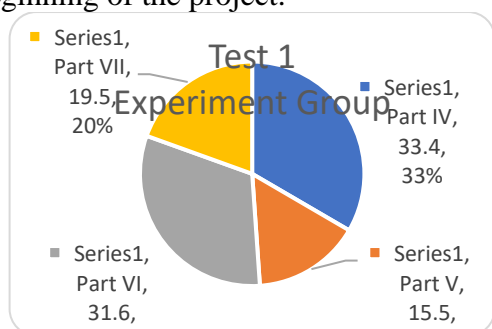
The research was conducted during the Autumn session of 2021 at this institute. A pre-test was administered at the beginning of the period, with both control and experimental groups consisting of 30 students each. The control group comprised of 5 male and 25 female students, while the experimental group had 7 male and 23 female students. The average age of the students was 18.

The following pie chart represents the results of the control group in Samarkand Finn Institute of Pedagogy on the Pre-test (Test 1). According to the pie chart, we can see that the percentage of the control group for Part IV, the listening and reading part, is 22% out of 100%. Part V is 25%, Part VI is 31%, which is the highest result among the four parts, and Part VII is 22%. This shows that at the beginning of the test, the students from the control group showed good results in Part V (reading and speaking) and Part VI (reading and writing skills), which means their productive skills are better than their receptive skills.



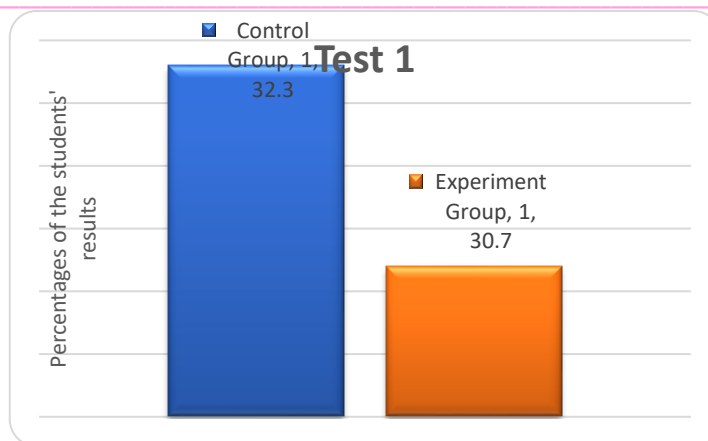
Part IV	22,4
Part V	24,7
Part VI	31,3
Part VII	21,6

In the experimental group, the students showed higher results in Part IV with 33.4% and Part VI with 33.4%, while showing lower results in Part VII with 19.5% and the lowest percentage in Part V with only 15.5%. Based on these results, it can be seen that the students' reading and writing skills were better than their listening and speaking and reading comprehension skills at the beginning of the project.



PartIV	33,4
Part V	15,5
PartVI	31,6
PartVII	19,5

When comparing the control and experiment groups in Test 1, we can see that the control group's result was higher than that of the experiment group according to the table below. However, there was not much difference between the two groups. The control group's overall percentage was 32.3%, while the experiment group's percentage was 30.7%.

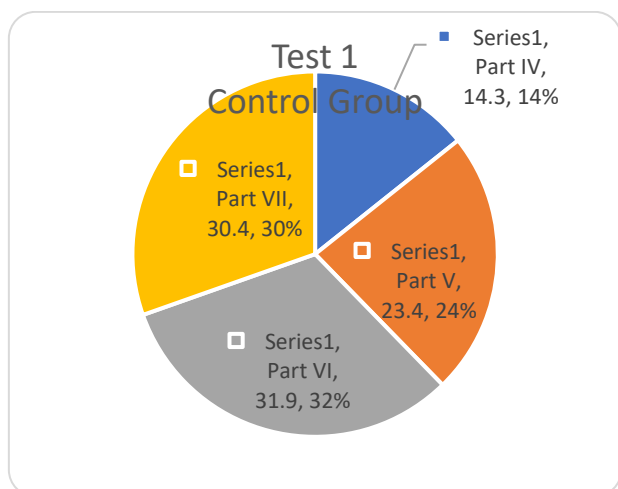


Control Group	32,3
Experiment Group	30,7

**Tests in SamSIFL- explaining the details of the table-generalization /finding**

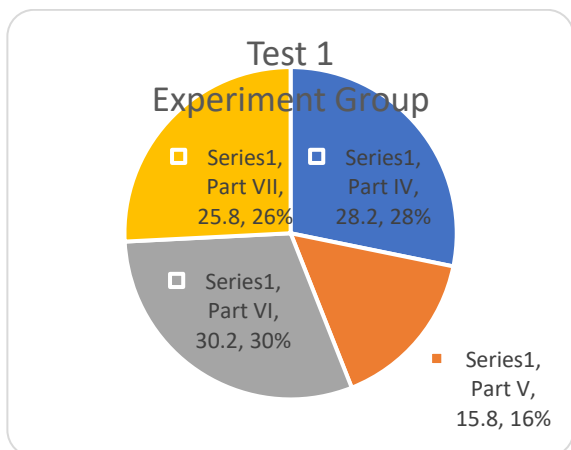
The pre-test was taken from the first year students of Samarkand State Institute of Foreign Languages in 2022 March. There also were two groups; control and experiment groups. In each group there were 20 students, 2 male and 18 female students in the control and 4 male and 16 female students in experiment groups. The average age of the students was 18.

The pie chart below shows the result was taken in the pre-test (Test1) in the control group. According to the chart, the students' result from the Part IV is 14%, the Part V is 24%. The percentage of the Part VI is 32, which mean the students' reading and writing skills was the highest amid other skills. Their reading comprehension skills result is 24% (Part V).



Part IV	14,3
Part V	23,4
Part VI	31,9
Part VII	30,4

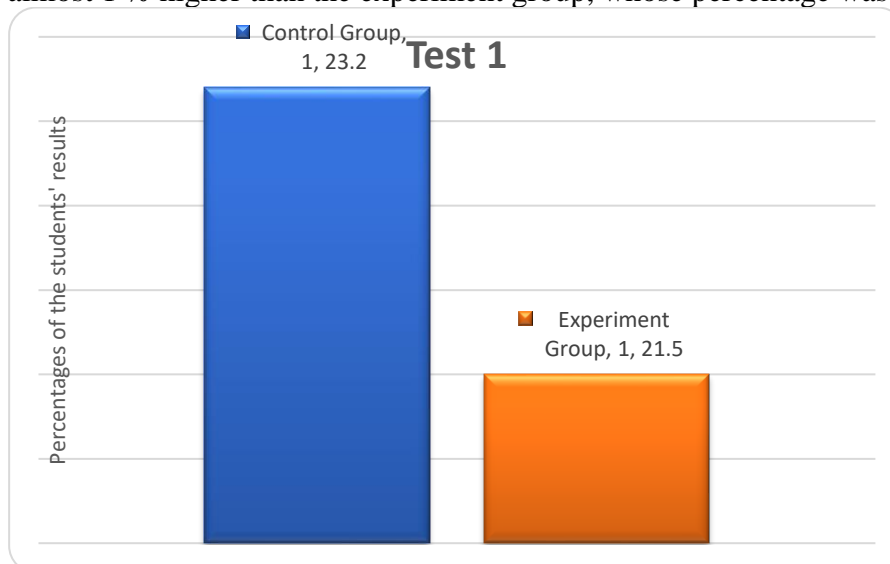
The pie chart represents the percentages of the experimental group from the Test 1. According to their results we can see that the lowest percentage is in Part V from reading and speaking skills and then in Part VII (reading comprehension skills) with 26%. The result of their listening and reading skills is 28% and reading and writing skills is 30%.



Part IV	28,2
Part V	15,8
Part VI	30,2
Part VII	25,8

While comparing these two groups' results, we found out that the students from the control group showed good results in Part VI, Part VI and Part VII. On the other hand the students from the experiment group showed a higher score only in Part IV with 13, 9% higher than control group.

To compare the overall results of the two groups we can see that the percentage of the control group in this institute was 23, 2, almost 1 % higher than the experiment group, whose percentage was 21,5 %.



### Final tests-how it differs from the first tests

After teaching English reading skills, a final test (Test 2) was administered to both the control and experimental groups at Uzbekistan Finn Pedagogical Institute and SamSEFL at the end of the main project. For students at SamSU, the final test was given at the end of the pilot project and differed from the test given at the end of the main project. Like Test 1, Test 2 was also administered online and students were provided with a link and given a set period of time to complete it.

Test 2, like Test 1, consists of four parts that test students' listening, speaking and writing skills, as well as their reading comprehension. The Test 2 was administered to the research subjects in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the experimental groups. Although the same level was used for both tests, different reading texts were selected for Test 2.

Test 2, like Test 1, begins with Part IV, which tests listening and reading skills. In this part, students listen to a recording of a text (which they may listen to twice) and answer the provided questions. The time given is 10 minutes.

Part V is focused on testing the students' reading and speaking skills. During this section, the students will read a text about "The Story of Blue Jeans" and orally answer questions by recording their voice and inserting the answers on the website. Students are given 25 minutes for this part.



Tests on reading and writing skills were administered in Part VI. In this section, the students read the text "Memory Magic" and wrote answers to the questions that followed the text. Additionally, 25 minutes were allotted for this task.

The last part involves testing the students' reading comprehension skills. They will read a text about Harry Potter and choose the correct answer to the questions provided. The allotted time is 25 minutes.

As we can see that there are not big different changes between Test1 and Test2.

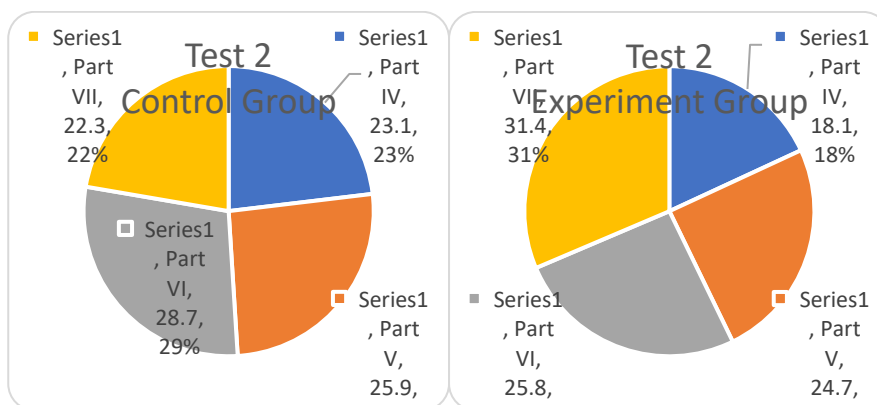
**The finding in Test 2 in the Uzbekistan Finn Pedagogical Institute shows the following results:**

**Control group in Test 2**

The following pie charts represents the results of the control and experiment group in Samarkand Finn Institute of Pedagogy on the Post-test (Test 2). According to the pie charts, we can see that the percentage of the control group for Part IV, the listening and reading part, is 23,1% out of 100%. Part V is 25,9%, Part VI is 28,7%, which is the highest result among the four parts, and Part VII is 22,3%. This shows that there is not a significant improvement in control group compared their results in Test 2 with the Test1.

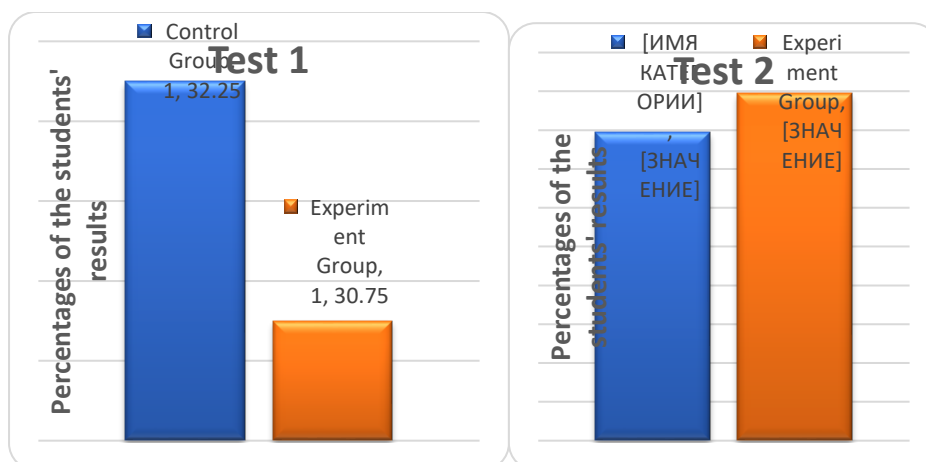
**However, in the experiment group we can see a significant growth in Test 2.**

Part IV, listening and reading test result shows 18,1%, Part V, reading and speaking test is 24,7% . the results from Part VI and Part VII are 25,8% and 31,4 respectively.



Part IV	23.1	Part IV	18.1
Part V	25.9	Part V	24.7
Part VI	28.7	Part VI	25.8
Part VII	22.3	Part VII	31.4

If we compare the results of Test 1 and Test 2, we can see in the following bar charts that there was 7,5% improvements in control group while 14 % growth in the experiment group.

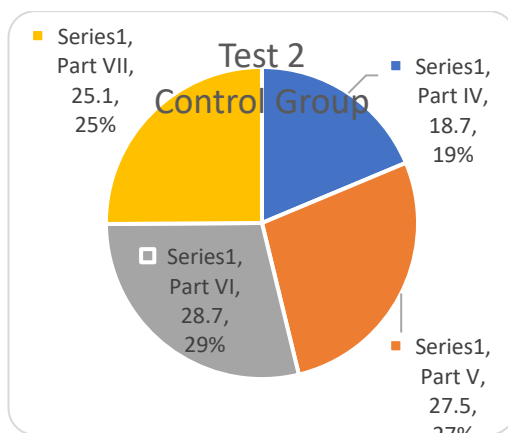


Control Group	32.25	Control Group	39.75
Experiment Group	30.75	Experiment Group	44.75

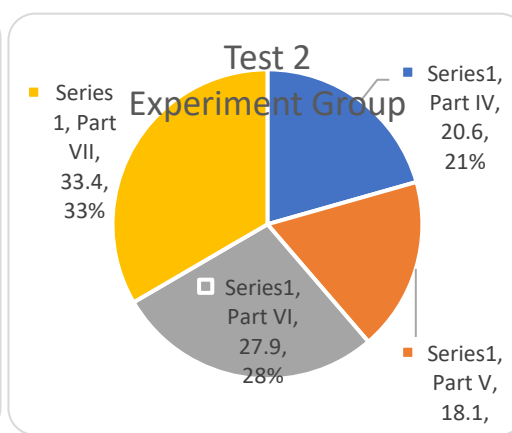
### The finding in Test 2 in SamSIFL

The pie charts below shows the result was taken in the post-test (Test2) in the control and experiment groups. According to the charts, the control group's result from the Part IV is 18,7%, the Part V is 27,5%. The percentage of the Part VI is 28,7, which mean the students' reading and writing skills were the highest amid other skills as it were in Test 1.. Their reading comprehension skills result is 25,1% (Part V).

From the percentages of the experimental group from the Test 2 we can see that the lowest percentage is in Part V from reading and speaking skills as it was in Test 1 and the highest is in Part VII (reading comprehension skills) with 33,4%. The result of their listening and reading skills is 20,6% and reading and writing skills is 27,9%.

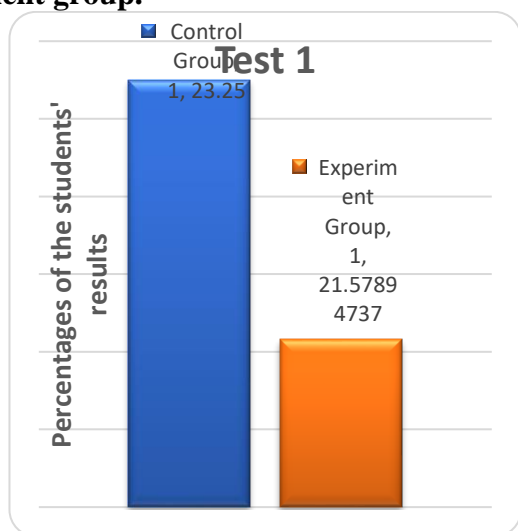


Part IV	18.7
Part V	27.5
Part VI	28.7
Part VII	25.1

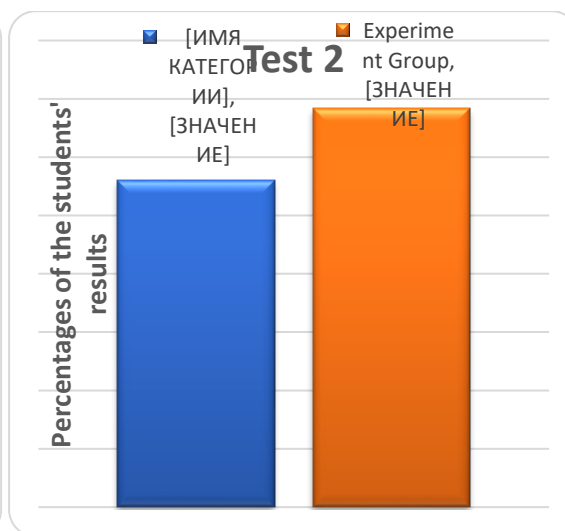


Part IV	20.6
Part V	18.1
Part VI	27.9
Part VII	33.4

To compare the experiment and control groups in Test 1 and Test 2, we can see that there has been 5,57 % growth in the result of the control group, while almost 13% improvement can be seen in the result of experiment group.



Control Group	23.25
Experiment Group	21.57



Control Group	28
Experiment Group	34.21

### Conclusion

In conclusion, I have described the importance of reading skills in a foreign language and analyzed the main project of my PhD dissertation at Samarkand Finn Institute of Pedagogy and Samarkand state institute of

foreign languages. The findings from Tests 1 and 2 suggest that participants in the experimental group showed a significant improvement in their reading skills after 30 lessons.

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