

ASSESSMENT OF READING SKILLS OF EARLY GRADE STUDENTS IN PAKISTAN

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the reading abilities of early grade (1st and 2nd) students. The population comprised of school children studying in grade 1st and grade 2nd in one of the public schools of district Haripur. Two tests were developed in order to collect the data. One of the tests was used to measure the academic achievement of students of grade 1st and grade 2nd students in English. It was developed by Pakistani Reading Project USAID, Peshawar office. While another test was developed on the same line and it was used to collect data from the same students in Urdu. Major findings revealed that the students got good marks as a whole which showed that most of the students were good in recognizing alphabets, sounds of letters, sight word in grade 1st. Students of grade 1st were facing difficulty in reading sentences and paragraph in both English and Urdu. The overall performance of students in English was slightly better than their performance in reading Urdu. Similarly, students of grade 2nd also performed well in reading activity in both languages (English & Urdu). Students found difficult to read sentences and paragraph fluently. It was concluded that majority of teachers at primary level classes were good enough in teaching reading. It was also concluded that instead of having less orientation with new techniques and strategies of teaching reading, teachers of public schools performed better at least in urban areas. Therefore, it was recommended that all teachers of public schools may be trained in the use of new approaches to teaching reading.

Keywords: Reading skills, Urdu, English, Early grades, Public school

Introduction

Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) and Early Grades Reading Assessment (EGRA) reported very alarming results of reading skills of students of primary classes in Pakistan. According to ASER (2012), analysis of

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reading ability in Urdu/Sindhi/Pashto shows that 43% of 3rd-grade students were able to read the text of 2nd graders students. 37% of Class 6 children and 28% of Class 7 children were not able to accomplish 2nd graders English tasks. Learning levels are much lower in English than in the local languages. Almost over one-third of the children in class 1st and class 2nd can read nothing in the English language. In class V, 6% of the children can read no English at all. One-third of the children in class 1st and one-eighth of the children in class 2nd are unable to recognize even the basic digits. Similarly, EGRA also highlighted similar types of assessment results in Urdu and English of Class 2nd and class 4th on the basis of which United States Agency of International Development (USAID) started its Reading Project in Pakistan. As a researcher and teacher, my experiences are little bit different and researcher is very much convinced that true picture of reading ability of students is not being shared. Although in Pakistan, English as a subject has been introduced recently in early grades but in towns and cities students enrolled in English medium schools performed better in reading in both languages (English and Urdu) for several years. It is difficult to believe on such reports. therefore, the researcher planned to conduct this study with grade 1st and grade 2nd children of public schools in district Haripur.

Reading ability is a basic skill, which an individual needs to have in order to understand the world around. Learning to read is critical for a student's academic success and it has a great impact on the emotional and social well being. Students learn these skills in their early years of schooling but not all of the students could learn reading skills appropriately (Lyons, 2003). Reading is defined as it is more than saying words rather it involves reading words in phrases, phrases in sentences and sentences that communicate a bigger message (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009b). Reading is decoding words, read fluently with expression, and comprehends what has been read. Chall and Indrisano (1996) divided reading in different stages, firstly it begins from birth to age 6 where children experience with alphabets to make a connection with letters, words, and spoken language. This stage moves into kindergarten where students formally received instructions and guidance from their teachers. Students begin to decode and identify words and principles of alphabets. At the second stage when students are in grade 2 and grade 3, fluency increases and students become more familiar with the complex text. The focus shifts toward the understanding whole text and to increase fluency rather than word recognition (Vaughn, Denton & Fletcher 2010). This stage is crucial as

students are building the foundations of reading ability. All of the students do not succeed there are many who are struggling with reading and do not climb out (Bear, Negrete & Cathey, 2012). Students of next stage of reading move to third grades when they begin to read for information. Students in this stage move from learning to read to reading to learn. Comprehension begins and students are confronted with more complex and cognitively more challenging text (Munson, 2010). At the next two stages, students reading texts for information reach at a higher level, which is not possible without a strong base of reading.

All of the stages are built on one another and successful completion of each stage reduces the risk of failure in academic life (Paris, 2007). According to Vadasy and Sanders (2013), readers need to be experts in recognizing printed words whereas, Paris, (2007) stated that as a productive and contributing members of society, individuals need to be able to extrapolate meaning from text. The problems of reading skills is universal as in the United States only one-third of students read at or above the proficient level, one third read at the basic level and remaining one-third read at the below basic level (Rampey, Dion & Donahue, 2009). According to Meier, Ariely, and Bracha (2009), schools are struggling to meet the demands of reading skills of students but those students who missed appropriate assistance in overcoming the problem of reading are subject to missing out important intelligent boosting properties of literacy. All the stakeholders of education are concerned with this important aspect of lifelong literacy skills.

Difficulties in Reading

Students are facing reading problems and overall language skills related to vocabulary and conceptual world knowledge (Carnine, Kameenui, Tarver, & Jungjohann, 2006). Some young students are not able to recognize the relationship among their knowledge about language, printed material and the world and how it works (Pinnell, Fried & Estice, 1990). Children who are facing problems of reading need support in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, text comprehension and vocabulary (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], 2000). Moore-Hart and Karabenick, (2009) said basic literacy skills are very important especially the reading skills as reading difficulties are the most frequent learning problems of students and it becomes the major reason of academic failure. Reading is a critical element of academic success and it extends across all academic and future arenas of life. Success in life and quality in life is greatly influenced by reading ability

(Blachman et al., 2014). Students who are struggling readers and those who do not receive quality instruction and assistance are in danger throughout their academic careers (Allor, Mathes, Roberts, Cheatham & Otaiba, 2014), they make little to no progress (Alstrom, Wadsworth, Olson, Willcutt & DeFries, 2011) therefore, they require intense intervention (Vaughn et al., 2010). According to Dickinson and McCabe (2001) students with reading difficulties in early classes continue throughout the school years, 88% of students who were poor in early grade remained poor in grade 4th (Juel, 1988), and student having poor reading skills in grade 1st continue as poor reader in grade 2nd and have errors in reading as compared to their fellows (Babayigit & Saubthiorp, 2010). Similarly, Blachman et al., (2014) explained that students of poor reading skills faced problems in their emotional and economic aspects of life.

Effective Reading Skills

According to Fountas and Pinnell (2009b), a core reading program of 90 to 120 minutes on daily basis proved as the most effective way of improving reading skills of students. Gallagher (2009) recommended that the amount of writing, text-based discussions and reading in the classroom three-time increased as compared to the routine. The National Reading Panel (NRP) (2000), and The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP), (2008) consulted more than one hundred thousand studies on reading and both concluded that the basic elements of reading which are phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension are essential for students to become successful reader. Phonemic awareness is the ability to notice, think about and work with individual sounds of spoken words and phonemes are smallest units of spoken language [The National Institute of Child and Human Development (NICHD), 2000]. According to Ryder, Tunmer, and Greaney (2008) instructions focusing on phonemic awareness in early grades helped to reduce achievement gap of students and usually this component of reading is provided in the form of songs and rhymes which is necessary for developing skills and knowledge for later reading stages.

Reynolds, Wheldall, and Madelaine (2011) concluded that if a child has the problem of incongruity in vocabulary, his/her issue of reading will remain for a longer period of time. The vocabulary of students is increased before their formal entry in schools and at the end of grade two, students with a good base of vocabulary possessed up to 8000 words (Biemiller, 2004). Students with limited vocabulary face difficulty when they encounter with unknown or seldom used word (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009b). Low vocabulary hinders the

students reading ability. Difficulty in reading need to be identified as early as possible with appropriate intervening strategy, it can be removed or lessened students reading comprehension (Butt, 2011; Wood, & Harman, 2011). Triplett and Buchanan (2005) suggested that conversation on literacy skills and comprehension should be promoted in any reading intervention strategy. If teachers are aware of the cognitive base and developmental progress of students, this understanding helps them in assessing students' progress, diagnosis and application of appropriate intervention to overcome reading difficulties (Broek, Kendeou, Lousberg & Visser, 2011). Students' previous knowledge, interactions and understanding play a greater role in developing comprehension ability. In early grades, the comprehension ability of students should be targeted and appropriate intervention strategies should be applied (Dooley, 2010).

According to Rasinski (2010) fluency in language refers to students' ability to read the text with speed, accuracy, and expression and it should be focused as a key to proficient reading. Fluency is cognizance of sentence arrangement and student's ability to comprehend the written text (Grabe, 2010) which is composed of accuracy, automaticity and prosody (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; NRP, 2000). According to Reutzel (2009) decoding, the rate of reading, use of volume, pitch, stress and juncture are components of fluency. Similarly, when students are not fluent readers the reading material to them is useless and meaningless while those students who are fluent reader understand the text easily (Gibson, Carledge & Keyes, 2011). Reading skills of the students are supposed to be very important as these skills truly open new avenues of learning for students. Without having reading skills students cannot understand the world in a real sense. This study is significant in terms of understanding the way teachers teach English and Urdu in junior classes. It is hoped that through the findings of this study teachers training institutes may get some possible clues in order to redesign there training for teachers who are teaching reading skills at junior levels. This study may highlight problems of teachers who teach reading skills to junior classes.

Research Methodology

The population of this study comprised of students studying in grade 1st and grade 2nd at government model middle school # 4, district Haripur. The whole population was considered as a sample of the study. Two tests were developed in order to collect the data. Test which was used to measure the academic achievement of students of grade 1st and grade 2nd students in

English was adopted by Pakistan Reading Project, USAID Peshawar office. While another test of Urdu was developed on the same lines and it was used to collect data from the same students. Each test was developed consisting of seven questions.

For English

1st question was about recognition of alphabets e.g. ABCs. 2nd question was about sounds of letters like each of the 26 alphabet letters represents one or more sounds. A letter's name can also be one of its sounds. For example, the letter *A* can sound like *aaa*, *ah*, or *ae*. 3rd question was related to Sound of the last letter in Alphabet, 4th question was about recognizing spelling in words like good (g.o.o.d), 5th question was about sight words often also called high-frequency sight words, commonly used words that young children are encouraged to memorize as a whole by sight, so that they can automatically recognize these words in print without having to use any strategies to decode. 6th question was about sentences which were a set of words that is complete in itself, typically containing a subject and predicate, conveying a statement, question, exclamation, or command, and consisting of the main clause and sometimes one or more subordinate clauses. 7th question was about Oral Reading Fluency one of several critical components required for successful **reading** comprehension. Students who **read** with automaticity and have appropriate speed, accuracy, and proper expression are more likely to comprehend material because they are able to focus on the meaning of the text.

For Urdu Test

1st question was about recognition of alphabets e.g. ا ب پ. 2nd question was about sounds of letters like each of the 26 alphabet letters represents one or more sounds. A letter's name can also be one of its sounds. For example, the letter / can sound like *لف*. 3rd question was related to Sound of last letter in Alphabet for example *م کا*. 4th question was about recognizing of spelling in words like *بابا (ب.ا.ب.ا)*. 5th question was about sight words often also called high-frequency sight words, are commonly used words that young children are encouraged to memorize as a whole by sight, so that they can automatically recognize these words in print without having to use any strategies to decode. 6th question was about sentences which are a set of words that is complete in itself, typically containing a subject and predicate, conveying a statement, question, exclamation, or command, and consisting of a main clause and sometimes one or more subordinate clauses. *بابا*. 7th question was about Oral Reading Fluency one of several critical

components required for successful **reading** comprehension. Students who **read** with automaticity and have appropriate speed, accuracy, and proper expression are more likely to comprehend material because they are able to focus on the meaning of the text. ہمارے ملک کا نام پاکستان ہے۔ اس کے جھنڈے کا رنگ سبز اور سفید ہے۔

Tests were administered by the researcher himself in order to collect data. Prior permission was sorted out from the head of the institute. Data were simply analyzed by percentage. Against each question, marks were obtained and the decision was made about the success or failure of the student. In the end total marks in the test were also considered for decision-making process. The data was collected against question no 1. Students read words and marks were given against set criteria. Against question, no 2 data was collected through recognizing correct sounds of the letter. In question, no 3rd data was collected through recognizing sounds of the last letter in Alphabet. In question, no 4th data was collected through recognizing spelling in words. Data of question no 5th was collected through the reading of sight words. Question no 6th data was collected through the reading whole sentence. Question no 7th data was

S.N o	Questions →	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 5	Q 6	Q 7
Qs	Name	Names of Alphabets	Sound of letters	Sound of last letter	spellings	Sight word	sentences	Paragraph reading
1	Haider	20/20	20/20	10/10	10/10	9/10	7/10	5/10
2	Sohail	16/20	15/20	9/10	6/10	6/10	5/10	4/10
3	Hasher	20/20	20/20	10/10	10/10	7/10	6/10	4/10
4	Abdullah	20/20	20/20	8/10	7/10	7/10	6/10	4/10
5	Bashir	20/20	20/20	8/10	8/10	8/10	6/10	4/10
6	Noman	19/20	19/20	9/10	8/10	6/10	4/10	4/10
7	Muneeb	20/20	20/20	8/10	7/10	6/10	5/10	4/10
8	Haseeb	17/20	17/20	6/10	5/10	4/10	4/10	3/10
9	Amir	19/20	19/20	10/10	6/10	5/10	5/10	4/10
10	Bilal	18/20	18/20	8/10	7/10	6/10	4/10	4/10
11	Fahd	20/20	20/20	8/10	7/10	5/10	4/10	3/10
12	Akram	20/20	20/20	10/10	10/10	6/10	5/10	3/10
13	Mateen	18/20	17/20	6/10	5/10	5/10	4/10	3/10
14	Saim	19/20	19/20	8/10	6/10	6/10	4/10	3/10
15	Ali Abid	19/20	19/20	7/10	5/10	5/10	5/10	3/10
16	Faizan	18/20	18/20	7/10	6/10	6/10	5/10	4/10
17	Baqir	17/20	16/20	6/10	5/10	5/10	4/10	3/10
18	Saifullah	19/20	19/20	7/10	6/10	6/10	4/10	2/10
19	Samiulla	18/20	15/20	6/10	4/10	3/10	2/10	2/10
20	Zain	20/20	20/20	6/10	4/10	3/10	2/10	1/10
21	Zohaib	16/20	15/20	3/10	2/10	2/10	2/10	1/10
22	Sanaulla	16/20	14/20	4/10	3/10	2/10	2/10	1/10

Average Marks: 63.18/ 70%

collected through the reading of the whole paragraph.

Results

Table one of English Test (Grade 1st)

Table 1 revealed that most of the students studying in grade 1st were well versed in recognizing alphabets of English and sounds of letters (a to z). Similarly, the majority also performed well when they were asked about identify the sound of the last letter of a word, the spelling of words and sight words. Very few students could read sentences and paragraph, remaining most of the students were not good in reading sentences and paragraphs. As a whole, average marks were 63.18 out of 90 marks which reflect 70% performance. This performance was quite satisfactory.

Table 2: Test of Urdu Grade-1

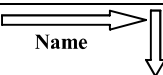
S.N	Questions	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 5	Q 6	Q 7
0								
Qs	 Name	Names of Alphabets	Sound of letters	Sound of last letter	spellings	Sight word	sentences	Paragraph reading
1	Haider	18/20	17/20	8/10	7/10	7/10	7/10	7/10
2	Sohail	16/20	16/20	7/10	6/10	6/10	5/10	5/10
3	Hasher	14/20	13/20	7/10	7/10	7/10	5/10	4/10
4	Abdullah	16/20	15/20	7/10	7/10	6/10	5/10	4/10
5	Bashir	16/20	14/20	8/10	6/10	6/10	6/10	4/10
6	Noman	17/20	16/20	6/10	7/10	6/10	4/10	4/10
7	Muneeb	16/20	16/20	6/10	6/10	6/10	5/10	4/10
8	Haseeb	16/20	15/20	5/10	5/10	4/10	4/10	3/10
9	Amir	16/20	14/20	6/10	6/10	5/10	5/10	4/10
10	Bilal	13/20	14/20	7/10	5/10	6/10	3/10	3/10
11	Fahd	14/20	13/20	6/10	5/10	4/10	4/10	3/10
12	Akram	16/20	12/20	5/10	4/10	4/10	3/10	3/10
13	Mateen	16/20	15/20	7/10	6/10	3/10	4/10	3/10
14	Saim	16/20	14/20	5/10	4/10	4/10	5/10	3/10
15	Ali Abid	13/20	16/20	5/10	4/10	3/10	5/10	3/10
16	Faizan	14/20	13/20	5/10	5/10	4/10	5/10	4/10
17	Baqir	13/20	13/20	5/10	4/10	3/10	2/10	3/10
18	Saifullah	13/20	12/20	5/10	3/10	3/10	2/10	2/10
19	Samiulla	11/20	11/20	4/10	4/10	3/10	2/10	2/10
20	Zain	14/20	15/20	5/10	3/10	2/10	2/10	1/10
21	Zohaib	13/20	12/20	4/10	2/10	1/10	2/10	1/10
22	Sanaulla	12/20	11/20	4/10	1/10	1/10	2/10	1/10
Average Marks: 50.86/ 56.51%								

Table 2 revealed that most of the students studying in grade 1st were well versed in recognizing alphabets of Urdu and sounds of letters (e.g. ا ب پ). Similarly, the majority also performed well when they were asked about identify the sound of the last letter of a word and spelling of words. About half of students could perform better in identifying sight words of Urdu. Very few students could read sentences and paragraph, remaining most of the students were not good in reading sentences and paragraphs. As a whole, average marks were 50.86 out of 90 marks which reflect 56.51% performance. This

performance was satisfactory to some extent as compared to those findings which were reported by ASER.

Table 3: English Reading (Grade II)

S.N	Questions	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 5	Q 6	Q 7
Qs	Name	Names of Alphabets	Sound of letters	Sound of last letter	spellings	Sight word	sentences	Paragraph reading
1	Ayesha	20/20	20/20	10/10	10/10	8/10	7/10	6/10
2	Usman	20/20	20/20	10/10	9/10	7/10	6/10	5/10
3	Tariq	20/20	20/20	10/10	9/10	7/10	6/10	5/10
4	Rabia	20/20	20/20	10/10	10/10	7/10	6/10	5/10
5	Azmat	20/20	20/20	10/10	10/10	7/10	7/10	5/10
6	Haroon	20/20	19/20	10/10	9/10	7/10	6/10	5/10
7	Mubarak	20/20	20/20	10/10	10/10	7/10	6/10	5/10
8	Tasleem	20/20	20/20	9/10	8/10	6/10	5/10	6/10
9	Qamar	20/20	20/20	10/10	9/10	6/10	5/10	6/10
10	Parveen	19/20	18/20	9/10	8/10	6/10	5/10	5/10
11	Shams	20/20	20/20	9/10	8/10	6/10	5/10	5/10
12	Fareeha	18/20	17/20	7/10	6/10	6/10	4/10	4/10
13	Rashem	20/20	20/20	9/10	7/10	5/10	4/10	4/10
14	Sami	18/20	16/20	7/10	5/10	5/10	4/10	4/10
15	Abida	20/20	20/20	9/10	8/10	5/10	4/10	4/10
16	Kareem	19/20	18/20	8/10	8/10	5/10	4/10	4/10
17	Saghir	20/20	20/20	9/10	9/10	6/10	4/10	4/10
18	Farooq	19/20	18/20	7/10	6/10	5/10	5/10	4/10
19	Toqeer	20/20	19/20	7/10	6/10	5/10	4/10	4/10
20	Zahida	17/20	16/20	6/10	5/10	4/10	3/10	3/10
21	Zahoor	17/20	15/20	6/10	5/10	4/10	3/10	3/10
22	Javed	16/20	15/20	5/10	5/10	4/10	3/10	3/10

Average Marks: 76.2/ 84.4%

Table 3 revealed that most of the students studying in grade II were well versed in recognizing alphabets of Urdu and sounds of letters (e.g. ا ب پ). Similarly, the majority also performed well when they were asked about identify the sound of the last letter of a word and spelling of words. About half of students could perform better in identifying sight words of Urdu. Very few students could read sentences and paragraph, remaining most of the students were not good in reading sentences and paragraphs. As a whole, average marks were 76.2 out of 90 marks which reflect 84% performance. This performance was very good to some extent as compared to those findings which were reported by ASER.

Table 4: Urdu Reading (Grade II)

S.N	Question	Q 1	Q 2	Q 3	Q 4	Q 5	Q 6	Q 7
Qs	Name	Names of Alphabets	Sound of letters	Sound of last letter	spellings	Sight word	sentences	Paragraph reading
1	Ayesha	20/20	20/20	10/10	10/10	8/10	7/10	6/10
2	Usman	20/20	20/20	10/10	9/10	7/10	6/10	5/10
3	Tariq	20/20	20/20	10/10	9/10	8/10	6/10	5/10
4	Rabia	20/20	20/20	10/10	10/10	6/10	6/10	5/10
5	Azmat	20/20	20/20	10/10	10/10	7/10	7/10	5/10
6	Haroon	20/20	19/20	10/10	9/10	7/10	6/10	6/10
7	Mubarak	20/20	20/20	10/10	9/10	7/10	6/10	4/10
8	Tasleem	19/20	19/20	8/10	8/10	6/10	5/10	6/10
9	Qamar	18/20	18/20	9/10	9/10	7/10	6/10	6/10
10	Parveen	19/20	18/20	9/10	8/10	5/10	5/10	4/10
11	Shams	20/20	19/20	9/10	8/10	6/10	5/10	5/10
12	Fareeha	18/20	17/20	7/10	6/10	6/10	4/10	4/10

13	Rashem	19/20	19/20	9/10	7/10	5/10	5/10	3/10
14	Sami	17/20	16/20	7/10	5/10	5/10	4/10	3/10
15	Abida	19/20	18/20	8/10	7/10	4/10	4/10	3/10
16	Kareem	19/20	18/20	7/10	7/10	5/10	5/10	4/10
17	Saghir	18/20	17/20	8/10	9/10	4/10	4/10	3/10
18	Farooq	18/20	17/20	7/10	6/10	4/10	5/10	4/10
19	Toqeer	19/20	16/20	7/10	6/10	5/10	4/10	4/10
20	Zahida	17/20	15/20	6/10	5/10	4/10	4/10	2/10
21	Zahoor	17/20	15/20	6/10	5/10	4/10	3/10	1/10
22	Javed	16/20	15/20	5/10	5/10	4/10	3/10	1/10
Average Marks: 68.13/ 75.7%								

Table 4 revealed that most of the students studying in grade II were well versed in recognizing alphabets of Urdu and sounds of letters (e.g. ا ب پ .). Similarly, the majority also performed well when they were asked about identify the sound of the last letter of a word and spelling of words. About half of students could perform better in identifying sight words of Urdu. Very few students could read sentences and paragraph, remaining most of the students were not good in reading sentences and paragraphs. As a whole, average marks were 68.13 out of 90 marks which reflect 75.7% performance. This performance was very good to some extent as compared to those findings which were reported by ASER.

Conclusions

Following conclusions were drawn from the results of the study.

1. Teachers of public schools in urban areas teach reading skills very well to the students.
2. Students learn reading skills appropriately
3. Students perform better in English as compared to Urdu on both early grades
4. Students find difficulty in reading sentences and paragraph which reflect that they did not practice in reading sentences and paragraphs
5. International Nongovernment Organizations and other local organization like ASER did not share actual results of students in reading skills because the students of this study were from to very low level of socio-economic status. Instead of having opportunities and access to private schools in their surrounding, parents were not able to pay a fee of 300 to 500 rupees. Many of the children were working part times with their parents and still, they performed better.
6. It was also concluded that organizations reported wrong information to justify their own project activities.

Recommendations

The following were the recommendations of the study;

1. It is recommended that five component skills of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension must be given significant importance while teaching reading in English and Urdu.
2. Phonics approach being highly productive, it needs to be incorporated in training of teachers for teaching English and Urdu reading.
3. Teachers of early grades must be trained in applying innovative teaching reading strategies.
4. Use of flash cards, rhyming words, pronunciation practices through drill and practice must be applied in early grades.
5. Students must be trained in answering oral questions from shorter to longer response in order to ensure communication and comprehension.
6. Active collaboration and cooperation with parents need to be built and especially the mothers may be trained and guide to pay attention to homework of students in early grades.



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