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# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS AND EMPIRICAL REALITIES OF PRIMARY READING LITERACY IN UZBEKISTAN ALIGNING CLASSROOM ENACTMENT WITH PIRLS COMPREHENSION PROCESSES

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**Abstract**

This research note examines the theoretical underpinnings and classroom realities of primary reading literacy in Uzbekistan in the context of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Drawing on the RAND Reading Study Group model, the Simple View of Reading, and the PIRLS 2021 assessment framework, it analyzes how instructional activities align with the comprehension processes that PIRLS assesses. Observations of 32 Reading Literacy lessons in 16 fourth-grade classrooms (N=16) across eight schools in Tashkent city and the Samarkand and Namangan regions show that reproductive and literal activities were observed in 14 to 16 of the 16 classrooms, while straightforward inferencing was observed in 6 and integrative or evaluative tasks in 4. The pattern is consistent with the narrow, technical conception of reading literacy that earlier national research reports among teachers. The note recommends re-conceptualizing reading literacy and restructuring task construction in primary teacher training.

**Keywords**

PIRLS, primary education, reading literacy, RAND model, Simple View of Reading, classroom observation, cognitive demand, Uzbekistan.

## Introduction

Participation in International Large-Scale Assessments (ILSAs) such as PIRLS has changed how reading literacy is conceptualized in primary education. Rather than treating reading merely as the mastery of a technical skill, PIRLS assesses it as the construction of meaning from text for different reading purposes. This research note investigates how far everyday activities in Uzbekistan's fourth-grade Reading Literacy

lessons align with this view. It first outlines three theoretical anchors (the RAND model, the Simple View of Reading, and the PIRLS framework), then reviews the national context, and finally reports a classroom observation study whose categories are mapped onto the PIRLS comprehension processes.

Theoretical Framework. A primary theoretical anchor is the model formulated by the RAND Reading Study Group under Catherine Snow, which defines reading comprehension as "simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language" (Snow 2002, 12). The pairing of extracting and constructing carries methodological weight: textual meaning is not static information absorbed passively by a reader, but a meaning generated through active reader–text interaction.

In the RAND architecture, comprehension occurs at the intersection of three elements, the reader, the text, and the activity, all situated within a broader socio-cultural context (Snow 2002, 13). The reader brings cognitive capacities, prior knowledge, motivation, and experience; the text may be narrative or informational; and the activity defines the purpose, from factual retrieval to critical evaluation. In line with constructivist accounts, learners integrate new information into existing schemas to build a mental representation of the text (Weise 2019, 13). Comprehension difficulties therefore cannot be reduced to individual decoding skill; they must also be analyzed through the design of the activity and the instructional scaffolding that surrounds it.

The Simple View of Reading explains why decoding alone cannot secure comprehension. Gough and Tunmer (1986) proposed that reading equals the product of decoding and comprehension ($R = D \times C$). Because the relation is multiplicative, a high value in decoding cannot compensate for a near-zero value in comprehension. Instruction that concentrates on decoding speed and oral fluency develops only one factor of the product.

The framework of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD 2000), as summarized by Watkins (2011, 10), organizes reading instruction around alphabetic principles, fluency, and comprehension. Alphabetic skills and fluency

are necessary foundations for comprehension but do not replace it. Snow (2002, 5) notes that giving pupils opportunities to read independently may allow some to acquire comprehension, but most will not. Comprehension thus needs to be developed deliberately.

In Uzbek primary classrooms an additional orthographic mechanism is conceivable. If the transparency of the Uzbek orthography accelerates early decoding acquisition, teachers may mistake rapid mechanical reading for reading comprehension. Evidence that the balance between decoding and linguistic comprehension differs across more and less transparent orthographies (Florit and Cain 2011) makes this worth investigating, but it remains a hypothesis that this study does not test.

PIRLS operationalizes comprehension through four processes: (1) focusing on and retrieving explicitly stated information; (2) making straightforward inferences; (3) interpreting and integrating ideas and information; and (4) evaluating and critiquing content and textual elements (Mullis and Martin 2019). These are assessed across two reading purposes, literary experience and acquiring and using information, each accounting for half of the passages. The four processes receive 20, 30, 30, and 20 percent of assessment items respectively; thus half of all items require the more integrative processes of interpreting, integrating, and evaluating.

This framework supplies the analytic categories for the present study. A classroom in which retrieval and recall predominate rehearses only a minority of what PIRLS demands. The comparison is indicative rather than exact: PIRLS percentages describe the distribution of test items, whereas the observational data below describe the presence of activity types in classrooms.

National research indicates substantial friction at the classroom interface. Nasriddinova (2025, 47–51) reports that primary school teachers predominantly conceptualize reading literacy in a narrow, technical sense, equating proficiency with oral speed, pronunciation accuracy, and mechanical decoding rather than textual interpretation. This is consistent with international benchmarking results: Xolmirzayev and Shakirov (2024, 22–23) report that Uzbek pupils ranked 49th among 57 participating

countries in PIRLS 2021, with about 70% performing only at lower-level, literal benchmark items and advanced evaluative performance virtually absent.

The national policy context is set by Presidential Decree No. PF-5712 (2019), which establishes the concept for developing the public education system of Uzbekistan until 2030.

Method. An observational study was conducted by the author in 16 fourth-grade classrooms (N=16) in eight general education schools in Tashkent city, Samarkand region, and Namangan region between January and February 2026. Permission for the observations was obtained before the lessons were attended. Two 45-minute lessons of the subject Reading Literacy were observed in each classroom, 32 lessons in total (about 24 hours of observation).

The observation covered four aspects: how the reading lesson was organized, which teaching methods were used, which pupil skills the lesson aimed to develop, and the cognitive levels covered by oral and written tasks. This note reports the findings on cognitive levels. Observed activities were classified into five categories: text retelling, literal answering of text-based questions, recalling characters and plot events, identifying implicit information, and integrating ideas and critical evaluation. These categories were mapped onto the PIRLS comprehension processes (Mullis and Martin 2019). An activity was counted for a classroom if it was observed in at least one of the two lessons. The counts therefore show in how many classrooms an activity occurred, not how often or for how long.

All observations were coded by a single observer, so inter-rater agreement could not be assessed; this is a limitation of the study. Because classrooms were nested within schools, the results are descriptive and are not intended for statistical generalization.

Results. **Table 1.** Classrooms in which each activity was observed, mapped onto PIRLS comprehension processes (N=16 classrooms, 32 lessons)

| **Observed activity** | **Cognitive domain** | **Approximate PIRLS process** | **Classrooms where observed** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Text retelling | Memory retrieval, factual summary | Retrieve (approximate) | 16/16 (100%) |

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|---|---|---|---|
| Literal answering of text-based questions | Locating explicit information | Retrieve explicitly stated information | 15/16 (94%) |
| Recalling characters and plot events | Literal recall | Retrieve (approximate) | 14/16 (88%) |
| Identifying implicit information | Straightforward inference | Make straightforward inferences | 6/16 (38%) |
| Integrating ideas and critical evaluation | Interpreting, justifying, evaluating | Interpret and integrate; evaluate and critique | 4/16 (25%) |

*Note:* Retelling and plot recall do not map cleanly onto a single PIRLS process and are classified as retrieval-oriented for analysis. The last row groups two PIRLS processes.

Reproductive, low-level activities were the most widespread, observed in 14 to 16 of the 16 classrooms: literal retelling, explicit fact extraction, and plot recall. These activities establish basic familiarity with a text but offer limited opportunities to cultivate the interpretive and evaluative processes that PIRLS assesses.

Discussion. The observations identified five cognitive difficulties in pupils' work with texts. These are the observer's qualitative impressions and were not systematically coded:

1. Inferential deficit. Pupils had difficulty drawing simple inferences from unstated premises and needed continuous teacher prompting. This can be read through the distinction between the textbase, the propositions stated in the text, and the situation model, which integrates the text with prior knowledge (van Dijk and Kintsch 1983; Kintsch 1988): retelling can be accomplished at the textbase level, whereas inferencing requires a situation model.

2. Weak information integration. Independent performance declined noticeably when tasks required synthesizing information across paragraphs.

3. Absence of analytical reasoning chains. Pupils struggled to aggregate separate pieces of textual evidence into independent thematic generalizations.

4. Lack of evidence-based justification. Pupils were rarely trained or prompted to support their claims with direct reference to the text.

5. Suppressed reflective and critical stance. Tasks inviting critical evaluation of the author's perspective, character motivation, or text structure were almost absent.

Read against the RAND model, the pattern is consistent with a narrow range of activities: the activity element is largely reduced to retrieval and reproduction, which leaves the reader and text elements rarely stretched. Read against the Simple View, it suggests that the comprehension factor is exercised mainly at the level of literal reproduction; decoding and teachers' beliefs were not measured in this study, so the link to the decoding-oriented conception reported by Nasriddinova (2025) remains an interpretation. Read against PIRLS, the integrative half of the framework appears largely unpracticed in the observed lessons.

Conclusion and Recommendations. Bridging educational theory and classroom enactment requires a systematic re-conceptualization of primary reading literacy in Uzbekistan. Professional development should shift teacher thinking from decoding speed toward higher-order comprehension. Methodologically, this calls for (a) structured "task construction guides" aligned with the four PIRLS comprehension processes; (b) explicit scaffolding of metacognitive strategies such as self-monitoring and evidence-gathering; and (c) attention to expository and informational texts, which account for half of the PIRLS passages (the present study did not examine text genres). Future research should use multi-observer coding to establish inter-rater reliability, record the duration and frequency of task types, and compare national textbook activities with PIRLS item specifications.

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