

Enhancing reading skills among pre-service primary school teachers in Kazakhstan

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Jan 15, 2026

Revised Mar 28, 2026

Accepted Apr 8, 2026

Keywords:

Asia

Pre-service teachers

Primary education

Reading

Reading curriculum

ABSTRACT

Educators rely heavily on reading proficiency, but the reading habits of prospective teachers and their preparedness in teaching methods are frequently disregarded. In Kazakhstan, the preparedness of pre-service teachers to promote reading is still not fully understood despite the current educational reforms. This study fills the gap by offering Kazakhstan-focused knowledge on pre-service teachers' reading habits and structural obstacles via a thorough mixed-methods approach. An explanatory sequential design was utilized. Data from 205 female pre-service primary school teachers at four universities in regions including Pavlodar, Karaganda, Shymkent, and Almaty were analyzed with the aid of descriptive statistics and analysis of variance (ANOVA). Data from 27 semi-structured interviews were evaluated through thematic analysis. The quantitative data showed a mix of opinions about leisure reading (mean (M)=3.09, standard deviation (SD)=1.44) and inadequate university preparation for teaching reading (M=3.05, SD=1.37). Participants reported digital reading fatigue with an average score of 3.07 and SD of 1.38, despite having frequent access to digital text. The qualitative data showed that time constraints (68%), academic overload (52%), and limited inclusion of practical applications in coursework were the primary obstacles. For Kazakhstani universities to develop effective future literacy role models, they must shift from purely theoretical instruction. Updating curricula with contemporary, culturally relevant texts and incorporating hands-on, peer-facilitated reading exercises is strongly advised to foster teacher confidence in instructional methods.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reading proficiency serves as a fundamental skill for personal development and professional success, while supporting educational achievement. For pre-service primary school teachers, reading proficiency holds a particular significance. Pre-service primary school teachers should achieve reading mastery and demonstrate reading habits in order to motivate young learners towards reading [1]–[3]. The early school years, which establish the foundation for lifelong literacy, critically depend on teachers' reading practices and instructional effectiveness. Research indicates that future teachers start their careers with inadequate reading motivation and lack knowledge about creating a reading culture in their classrooms [4]–[6], despite the profession's vital role.

The value of reading for teachers' professional and personal growth has been recognized in teacher education programs worldwide for years. Research demonstrates that teachers who personally engage with reading materials establish instructional practices and literacy beliefs that reflect this engagement [7], [8]. However, studies from the United States, Europe, and Asia reveal a troubling trend, and research reveals that pre-service teachers show poor reading habits alongside reduced motivation and minimal interest in reading for personal enjoyment and professional development [4], [9], [10]. The problem of insufficient reading engagement among teachers becomes especially critical during early childhood and primary education because teachers serve as essential figures in helping students develop passion for reading [6], [11]. Scholars have paid little attention to this issue in the Kazakhstani context. While the Ministry of Science and Higher Education has launched several reforms aimed at improving literacy rates and teaching standards, the following question remains: does teacher training adequately prepare future educators to demonstrate strong reading habits and effective reading instruction techniques?

This study fills a gap in the existing research on teacher-training programs in Kazakhstan. While Kazakhstan participates in international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which show student reading proficiency concerns, research analyzing teacher preparation programs for developing reading skills among pre-service teachers remains limited [12], [13]. Reading instruction forms a part of the national curriculum requirements, but educational student surveys show a lack of frequent reading habits and difficulties in applying theoretical knowledge to classroom activities [14]. The gap between expected policy standards and teacher preparedness is a barrier to establishing reading-focused instructional environments in primary-education settings. Furthermore, a growing body of international literature highlights that teacher self-efficacy, particularly in reading instruction, is shaped by mastery experience, reflective practice, and early field-based tutoring [15], [16]. Without such experience, pre-service teachers may lack the confidence and skill set to adapt instruction to individual learners' needs, which is an essential requirement in today's diverse classrooms. In Kazakhstan, where teacher training remains highly theoretical and is sometimes disconnected from practical classroom realities, these challenges are particularly salient [17]–[20].

This research focuses on the significant disparity between the high expectations of the national reading curriculum and the current reading habits and pedagogical preparedness of prospective educators. This study's scientific value stems from its in-depth examination of the Kazakhstani educational system within a specific context, conducted through a thorough mixed-methods methodology. This research offers new empirical evidence that contrasts with previous studies by focusing on non-Western contexts and providing insights into the structural, academic, and psychological challenges faced by upcoming teachers in an education system undergoing significant change.

Specifically, the study was guided by the following research questions:

- i) What are the reading habits and challenges of pre-service primary school teachers in Kazakhstan?
- ii) How do these students perceive their ability and readiness to promote reading among children?

The working hypothesis is that pre-service teachers in Kazakhstan exhibit low intrinsic motivation to read, which undermines their capacity to inspire future students to read. This hypothesis is supported by international findings indicating that reading attitudes and habits formed during teacher education are strong predictors of classroom practice [2], [5], [21].

By investigating these dimensions, this study contributes to broader discourse on teacher preparation, reading education, and literacy development. It also provides evidence-based insights that can inform policymakers, curriculum designers, and teacher educators in Kazakhstan. As the nation seeks to improve student literacy outcomes, strengthening the reading skills and motivation of those tasked with teaching reading is an essential yet often overlooked step in the process.

2. METHOD

This study used a mixed-methods approach to explore reading behaviors and teaching self-perceptions among prospective educators. Combining both quantitative and qualitative research methods provides richer insights than using either approach alone [22]–[24]. The study implemented an explanatory sequential design where quantitative data collection came before qualitative inquiry [25]. The survey results identified significant reading engagement concerns, necessitating further exploration through subsequent interviews. Interview questions can be tailored according to quantitative data trends that improve responsiveness and relevance [26].

2.1. Participants and sampling

This research included 205 female pre-service teachers in their third and fourth years of primary education programs at four Kazakhstani universities located in Pavlodar, Karaganda, Shymkent, and Almaty. The inclusion of a female-only sample is methodologically justified, as the primary school teaching

profession in Kazakhstan is predominantly female; consequently, the sample mirrors the demographic characteristics of the target population. This study incorporated universities from different regions to address potential institutional and regional differences in reading-related pedagogical exposure.

The survey phase utilized a non-probability convenience sampling method, which is often chosen in educational research when participant access is restricted by institutional limits [27]. Researchers conducted purposive sampling to select 27 interview participants who represented different university affiliations and diverse survey responses, including contrasting attitudes and habits. Our approach follows established qualitative research practices that prioritize depth and variation instead of representativeness.

2.2. Data collection instruments

The self-administered questionnaire contained questions regarding reading frequency (e.g., daily or weekly), attitudes through Likert-scale statements, and perceived obstacles using both closed- and open-ended items. The development of the instrument adhered to survey research principles, such as clear wording, and included pilot testing alongside content validation, when possible [25]. The survey incorporated multiple question types, which enabled researchers to perform quantitative analyses while gathering qualitative data.

The interview protocol examined participants' reading practices, their preparedness to teach reading, and their interaction with digital texts. A flexible interview guide was used to enable the emergence of new themes while focusing on the study's goals. Researchers audio-recorded the interviews after obtaining participant consent and then prepared transcriptions that ensured anonymity. Follow-up questions facilitated deeper explanations and clarifications, leading to enhanced data quality.

The questionnaire was reviewed and piloted by a panel of university experts in primary education to guarantee construct validity. The survey was developed as a multi-dimensional index, encompassing specific behaviors, perceived obstacles, and attitudes, rather than a single, unified psychological scale. Calculating a single internal consistency metric is methodologically inapplicable, since the items are conceptually independent and were not designed to move in sync. Validity was confirmed through a consensus among experts, alignment with existing literature, and the mixed-methods triangulation of survey results with in-depth interview data.

2.3. Data analysis

Jamovi software was used to calculate descriptive statistics, which included frequencies along with means (M) and standard deviations (SD). The analysis identified data patterns in reading frequency, self-reported attitudes, and perceived barriers to guide the qualitative research phase. The descriptive analysis created a base for discovering themes that needed further investigation. The research team applied Braun and Clarke [28] six-phase thematic analysis framework to examine the interview data. Researchers coded transcripts to identify themes that they refined before constructing an analytical narrative with illustrative quotations. The iterative process enables researchers to revisit previous steps whenever they identify new patterns or contradictions.

2.4. Ethical considerations

The research team followed the ethical codes of the researchers in education throughout the study [29]. The investigators provided the participants with complete details about the study and obtained their informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained strictly. The student-based sample required researchers to implement measures to prevent feelings of coercion or institutional pressure. The study maintained secure storage for audio recordings and ensured volunteer participation in all stages.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study combined the survey results analyzed through Jamovi with qualitative findings from 27 semi-structured interviews. The results were organized according to four major themes derived from thematic analysis: perceptions of reading, challenges in teaching reading, digital reading engagement, and obstacles to personal reading.

3.1. Perceptions of reading

The quantitative data results match the qualitative research findings about reading ambivalence. The participants had an average score of 3.09 (SD=1.44) for reading pleasure, while 21% admitted to rarely reading outside their coursework requirements. The collected data confirm that pre-service teachers demonstrate a restricted intrinsic motivation to read. Furthermore, statistical analysis showed a statistically significant, yet very weak, negative correlation between reading enjoyment and the perceived ability to inspire children ($r=-0.145$, $p<0.05$). Due to the conceptually small effect size, this correlation cannot be used

to draw definitive conclusions, but it hints at a potential paradox where personal reading enjoyment does not automatically translate into pedagogical confidence.

Pre-service teachers recognize the importance of reading but exhibit restricted intrinsic motivation toward reading activities. The statement “*I read books because I enjoy it,*” received an average rating of 3.09 (SD=1.44) out of 5, which demonstrates mixed feelings. 27% of the students reported reading every day, but 21% said they either rarely read or never read beyond academic requirements. Most respondents expressed a belief in the importance of reading for professional development, with an average agreement score of 3.6. A total 45% of the respondents reported that their reading activities were limited to coursework requirements, with a mean response value of 3.2.

Interview feedback revealed that people commonly see reading as a mandatory activity instead of something that offers personal enrichment or joy.

“Our reading habits stem from necessity rather than personal desire. My passion for reading was destroyed because reading became a stressful task for examination purposes.”
(Participant 16, Karaganda)

Academic duties became the main focus of many students, who observed that their leisure-reading activities diminished.

“Before university, I loved reading novels. All my deadlines prevent me from finding any enjoyment in short stories.” (Participant 12, Pavlodar)
“Reading used to be an activity I did for my own enjoyment but now it feels like just another obligation.” (Participant 9, Shymkent)

The reduction of inherent reading motivation among students stems from academic pressure alongside insufficient exposure to motivating them to read figures and modern literary works. Most participants expressed that their course materials appeared outdated and no longer applicable.

“Why must our curriculum keep assigning literature from the 1970s? The available books don’t reflect modern youth or student life today.” (Participant 7, Almaty)

The gap between the perceived value of reading among students and their actual reading activities supports the theory that pre-service teachers who read little may struggle to demonstrate strong reading practices in their teaching environment. The mixed feelings about reading for pleasure shown through low intrinsic motivation scores and the high number of students who seldom read voluntarily match findings from global research on pre-service teachers’ reading practices. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that many future educators do not engage in frequent personal reading activities [5], [21], [30]. The “peter effect” [2] reveals that teachers who do not enjoy reading face difficulties motivating their students to develop an interest in reading. According to participants’ reflections, pre-service teachers in Kazakhstan show low intrinsic motivation to read because academic responsibilities overwhelm leisure reading and turn reading into an obligation instead of pleasure. Teachers’ personal reading practices and perspectives serve as critical indicators for predicting educational methods. Educational materials that students see as irrelevant and outdated contribute to their lack of motivation and suggest a need for curriculum changes in Kazakhstan’s teacher-education programs [11]. In addition, Dogan *et al.* [31] demonstrated that pre-service teachers’ reading attitudes improved when they participated in interactive activities like literature circles and highlighted the potential advantages of integrating these methods into teacher education programs.

3.2. Challenges in teaching reading

The ‘confident teaching’ analysis showed an average score of 2.92 (SD=1.40) while analysis of variance (ANOVA) identified significant regional differences ($F=2.92$, $p=0.03$) that demonstrated variable teaching confidence levels across different cities among students. Statistical analysis showed a positive but non-significant correlation between confidence and ability to inspire children ($r=0.120$, $p>0.05$). The data suggest that perceived teaching efficacy is an important issue that matches the interview results, identifying insufficient practical training, as shown in Table 1. Students indicated low confidence levels in their ability to teach reading when questioned. Participants scored their confidence in teaching children how to read at an average of 2.4 and 58% of them either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. The students rated their university preparation for teaching reading at an average score of 3.05 (SD=1.37). Students’ average score showed a marginally better result of 2.98 (SD=1.43) for “*I know which strategies to use to teach reading*” but still indicated uncertainty.

Table 1. Correlation matrix

Variables	Statistic	Read for pleasure	Confident teaching	Inspire children
Confident_teaching	Pearson's r	0.048	—	—
	df	203	—	—
	p-value	0.497	—	—
	95% CI upper	0.184	—	—
	95% CI lower	-0.090	—	—
	N	205	—	—
Inspire_children	Pearson's r	-0.145*	0.120	—
	df	203	203	—
	p-value	0.038	0.086	—
	95% CI upper	-0.008	0.253	—
	95% CI lower	-0.276	-0.017	—
	N	205	205	—

Note: *p<0.05

The interview data showed that the participants were uniformly concerned about insufficient practical training opportunities. The students indicated that their theoretical coursework lacked sufficient practical application opportunities.

“The curriculum taught us theoretical concepts such as phonemic awareness yet failed to provide practical teaching experience.” (Participant 3, Almaty)

The practicum experience mostly focused on classroom management instead of teaching literacy-specific techniques, according to multiple student reports.

“During practice, we did not really teach reading. We were just helping the mentor teacher to print papers.” (Participant 14, Pavlodar)

Teaching students recommended peer-led simulations and structured workshops to improve their confidence levels.

“Practicing teaching in simulated lessons would give us greater confidence when we start working in schools.” (Participant 6, Shymkent)

Several students noted a lack of teaching staff who demonstrated proper reading instruction methods.

“Our professors just do lectures with PowerPoint presentation. The demonstration of effective reading instruction remains unseen throughout our academic experience.” (Participant 1, Karaganda)

The absence of practical teaching experience along with too much theoretical focus prevents aspiring teachers from gaining essential literacy and teaching abilities.

Research data reveal that pre-service teachers display low confidence levels when preparing to instruct reading. Research shows that many pre-service teachers feel unprepared to effectively teach reading, which aligns with their expressed concerns about insufficient hands-on training and excessive theoretical focus in their university programs [21], [32]. The lack of practical application opportunities for theoretical knowledge throughout teaching practicums demonstrates a disconnection between teacher training and real classroom teaching demands. The demand for peer-led simulations, along with instructors demonstrating proper reading instruction methods, reveals potential teaching strategies to boost pre-service teachers' abilities and assurance in teaching reading. Research demonstrates that real-world teaching activities, such as tutoring readers who face difficulties, help build pre-service teachers' confidence in literacy instruction.

3.3. Digital reading engagement

The quantitative survey findings indicated moderate digital fatigue (M=3.07, SD=1.38) and print preference (M=2.91, SD=1.48), which supported the qualitative findings about digital exhaustion. Students experienced limited cognitive involvement during screen-based reading, even though they had substantial access to digital texts, which aligns with worldwide patterns. The role of digital reading remains multifaceted, with numerous conflicting aspects. Most students preferred print reading because even though 42% read digital texts weekly and 31% daily, their overall preference leaned toward print (M=2.91, SD=1.48).

The average response of 3.07 (SD=1.38) to the statement “*I feel fatigued from digital reading*” shows that people find reading on screens mentally tiring, as seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis

Index	Read_for_pleasure	Confident_teaching	University_prepared	Know_strategies	Inspire_children	Prefer_print	Digital_fatigue	Reads_digital_often
N	205	205	205	205	205	205	205	205
M	3.09	2.92	3.05	2.98	3.11	2.91	3.07	3.02
SD	1.44	1.40	1.37	1.43	1.39	1.48	1.38	1.42

Students often talked about their battle between digital reading ease and mental workload. Students who face economic constraints frequently turn to digital reading because it is essential.

“I can spend endless hours scrolling through TikTok or Instagram but struggle to maintain focus when reading digital articles.” (Participant 19, Almaty).

“My financial situation prevents me from purchasing printed books or printing reading materials which leads me to read online.” (Participant 5, Pavlodar)

The lack of current e-books in university libraries forced students to settle for less academic online content. Multiple interviews revealed that students frequently depended on their smartphones for reading, even though they could choose to read books instead.

“I am interested in reading but automatically start Instagram because of my routine. Despite my intention to read I find myself checking the time after several hours without reading anything.” (Participant 22, Almaty)

This recurring generational trend shows that reading competes with highly addictive digital entertainment options, which requires very little effort. Digital texts provide easy access yet they usually fail to maintain interest because they lack substantive content. The participation of pre-service teachers in digital reading experiences creates conflict between easy access and mental exhaustion. Frequent access to digital texts stems from affordability and library limitations, yet a preference for print persists because readers experience digital reading fatigue. The tension between digital entertainment attractions, such as social media, and the pursuit of meaningful reading reflects a significant pattern present in contemporary society. Teacher education programs must develop strategies to effectively use digital resources for reading instruction, while also teaching educators how to encourage mindful digital text engagement and maintain a balance with print reading practices. A study conducted by Maden [33] observed the common usage of digital media among pre-service language teachers in Turkey, while also examining how psychological elements such as motivation and anxiety affected their digital reading activities.

3.4. Obstacles to personal reading

Barriers to regular reading have been extensively reported. Lack of time emerged as the primary barrier (68%), followed by academic overload (52%) and low motivation (39%). Students reported an average score of 2.3 on having enough time to read, while their energy levels to read after studying reached a mean score of 2.6. Students who hold evening or weekend jobs for self-support or tuition expenses face increased exhaustion and reduced reading time because of their work commitment.

“After finishing class my first priority is going to work. My exhaustion reaches its peak by home time.” (Participant 11, Karaganda)

Regional universities experienced this situation at a higher rate, because financial aid was not easily accessible.

“The scholarship I receive is insufficient and my parents cannot assist me financially so I must work evening shifts at a café.” (Participant 2, Shymkent)

Several participants reported that they experienced repeated patterns of procrastination followed by guilt.

“I understand that increasing my reading is essential because I plan to become a teacher. I fail to accomplish reading tasks which results in feelings of guilt.” (Participant 10, Almaty)

Social media became the main distraction which took up time while diminishing mental endurance.

“I promise myself that I will read but I spend hours on Instagram and TikTok until I drift off to sleep instead.” (Participant 4, Shymkent)

The absence of engaging reading materials that matched students’ interests has emerged as a significant problem. The students expressed dissatisfaction because the curriculum and university libraries did not provide texts that matched their identities and interests.

“The books we need to read for class are from a distant past. Why aren’t our reading materials updated to reflect our current experiences?” (Participant 8, Pavlodar)

This problem frequently stemmed from institutions not prioritizing reading enough.

“How will we find inspiration if our professors do not discuss their reading materials?” (Participant 17, Karaganda)

Students encounter multiple overlapping barriers, including structural challenges such as work and academic demands, as well as emotional issues such as guilt and fatigue, alongside cultural problems such as irrelevant content and lack of role models, which together stifle their reading practices. Systematic solutions to these complex challenges will enable pre-service teachers to develop confidence and motivation to become literacy advocates.

Research on pre-service teachers from different contexts revealed the same personal reading barriers, such as insufficient time availability, heavy academic burdens, and diminished motivation levels. Regional university part-time work intensifies structural and emotional challenges, while procrastination-guilt cycles prevent future teachers from building stable reading habits. The major distraction of social media combined with students’ perceptions that reading materials lack appeal and relevance worsens these educational challenges. When professors do not demonstrate reading habits as part of their institutional expectations, they produce an environment that is not conducive to developing reading habits among pre-service teachers. Huang [5] found that pre-service teachers spent less time reading because of their part-time work commitments and social media engagement. Teacher education faculty must promote enjoyable reading experiences through literacy activities that carry intrinsic value for pre-service teachers [34].

4. CONCLUSION

This study’s findings, in relation to the research questions, indicate that pre-service primary school teachers in Kazakhstan encounter considerable structural and emotional obstacles to personal reading, which comprise severe time limitations, academic overload, and digital reading exhaustion. As a result, their natural inclination to read for enjoyment is restricted. Additionally, participants displayed high levels of uncertainty concerning their pedagogical preparedness to teach reading, attributing this to an overly theoretical university curriculum and insufficient practical teaching simulations during practicum experiences. This study contributes to the global discussion on the “peter effect” by showing that in transitioning educational systems, the lack of reading engagement among future educators is not just a personal failing. Instead, it is a result of a systemic problem that arises from academic demands being out of sync, structural obstacles (such as the requirement to work part-time), and digital diversions.

Based strictly on empirical data, it is recommended that teacher-education programs in Kazakhstan move from theoretical instruction to incorporating hands-on, peer-led reading instruction simulations. University curricula should be revised to incorporate contemporary literature that is culturally relevant, with the aim of fostering intrinsic motivation in students. Future studies should build on the results of this research by employing a longitudinal design to monitor how pre-service teachers’ reading habits change as they begin working full-time as teachers.

FUNDING INFORMATION

Authors state no funding involved.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

This journal uses the Contributor Roles Taxonomy (CRediT) to recognize individual author contributions, reduce authorship disputes, and facilitate collaboration.

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C : Conceptualization

M : Methodology

So : Software

Va : Validation

Fo : Formal analysis

I : Investigation

R : Resources

D : Data Curation

O : Writing - Original Draft

E : Writing - Review & Editing

Vi : Visualization

Su : Supervision

P : Project administration

Fu : Funding acquisition

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

Authors state no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, [SM], upon reasonable request.





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