

Factors Affecting English Reading Literacy at the Primary School Level of Bangladesh

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Abstract : This study is concerned with the identification of the challenges behind the low level of English reading literacy among the students of primary level in Bangladesh. However, the main objective of this study is to investigate the scopes and barriers of the students for reading. One of an interesting finding from this study is that the quality of the English teachers. Some teachers face problem to use standard pronunciation as well as in using English grammar that leads the learners to learn in wrong ways. Beyond this, some students did not pay any attention on careful reading during their classroom practice but the teacher could not provide them any instantaneous support. The findings suggest that factors affecting for the classroom practice of reading literacy, need to be more learners centered where the need of the quality teachers is the basic thing. Moreover, the outside of the classroom practice, teachers should develop new strategies by practicing more for the students. The relationship among the teachers, parents and the students should be developed to overcome reading barriers.

1. Introduction

This study aims at to explore the practical situation that creates reading barriers in English learning among the students inside or outside the school. However, language is used systematically for human communication. Like many other languages, English is a language which is internationally recognized; therefore it is called an "International Language". Like other natural languages, the English language learning also requires basic four skills and those are the listening, speaking, reading and the writing skill. However, reading literacy is a vital one that helps the reader to get the information from any text easily.

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It is not merely that reading could also be made company to anyone during leisure and offer lots of pleasure (Khanam, 2014). The reading literacy focuses that people will get access to the world of knowledge; they will not only be able to read any text rather will be able to summarize the contents from different sources as well as they will learn the new subject- matters (Murnane, Sawhill, & Snow, 2012). However, the previous studies have shown that the barriers in developing reading skills are mostly created from the unavailability of facility management and the lack of support from the educational institutions. For acquiring subject knowledge, to get gist information to have clear understanding with fun and for effective communication, the literacy of reading is mandatory. Reading deals with different aspects of learning. According to Roy (2007 : 3), the functions of reading can be illustrated as follows:

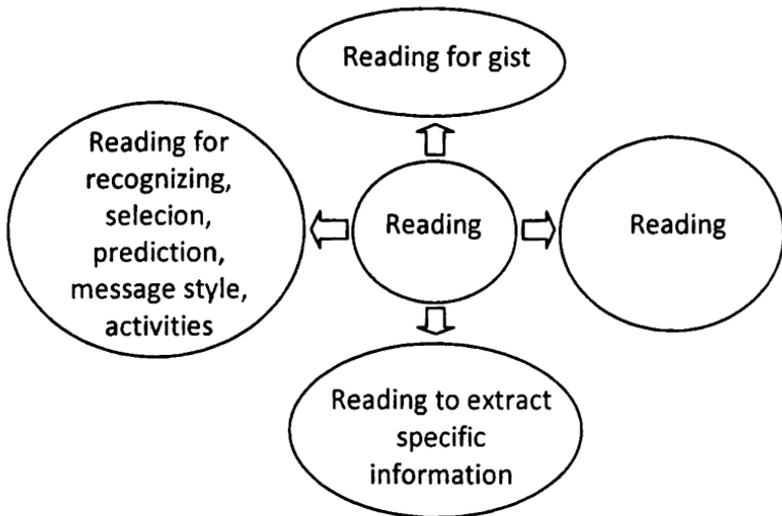


Figure1: Function of reading

English is being used as a foreign language in Bangladesh (Ehsan, Ashrafuzzaman & Das, 2013; Ashrafuzzaman, Babu & Begum, 2010; Rashid, 2009; Begum, Rashid & Banu, 2005; Banu, 2002; Ahmed, 2007). In this context, the most significant fact of learning for the primary grade learners is that transformation of letter symbols into meaningful language. (Hirsch, 2003). According to Guthrie & Davis (2003), the students having poor cognitive knowledge are weak in reading and they have little faith on their skill. Apart from these, reading habit leads learners to make satisfactory academic record that means students with good reading habit make good performance. (Bashir & Matto, 2012). However, reading is a

very pivotal language skill. This study has given more focus on reading practices and factors that affect severely on student's English reading performance. Therefore the objective of this study is — to explore the practical situation that creates barriers in English reading of the students inside or outside of the school. Along with this, the scope of developing reading patterns is also considered here under the supervision of their parents. In the next session, the study presents an ephemeral justification of this topic which serves as rationale for the present study. Besides, the specific research questions have been followed through the previous literatures to investigate this qualitative study.

2. Significance of the study

Reading is for shaping personality, thoughts, skills and knowledge. Reading is a habit and if anybody can practice it regularly then s/he can continue it throughout life. This should be habituated for the second language learner from the very early stage as well as from the elementary level of education. Since, Bangla is our mother tongue that is why the use of English is not mandatory to use at home or at family level. However, the skill of using English of Bangladeshi people is not at equal level as like as the native English speaking countries. The situation is mostly similar in other non-native English speaking countries. During the British and Pakistan period, the situation was not like as present because that time very few people were skilled in English and they used it only for their official, academic and other specific purposes. But after that, people gradually felt that English is very vital to lead a prestigious life and to achieve a better position in the society. Hence, the parents lead their children to learn English carefully for their better future. Even from our practical experience we have found that in each family those who have the minimum ability to bear the educational expenses they appointed a private tutor at home to facilitate their children especially for English. So, the consciousness of the Bangladeshi parents about using English is increasing day by day. However, the use of English is still not at the satisfactory level but far better than before. But, in our social context, students get very pint-size scope to use English in their day-to-day life. Every day they spend only a few hours in school and rest of the time they stay at home.

Reading literacy is a complex skill that helps to acquire other language skills easily (Abraham & Gram, 2009). Although listening, writing and

speaking are also very important skill, reading is the initiation for better understanding. As reading is a complex skill, that is why it is included by decoding, articulating, understanding, pronouncing, responding, meaning as well as speaking (Nuttall, 2005). Hence, in this study we only focus in reading literacy. In fact, we want to explore the specific factors that affect reading literacy at the primary level. Nevertheless, to investigate the types of reading activities or practice followed by students at school as well as at home which is our concern but the main concern focuses on the factors that creates barrier in practicing reading both inside and outside of classroom. Possible recommendation will also be made from the findings of the study. The findings of this study will uphold the current scenario, practice, scope and barriers of English reading of the students. The recommendations will carry out the highest significance of the study because the educators, teachers, practitioners and finally the parents will redesign their policy and strategies for the best interest of the students.

3. Conceptual Framework

The study follows the mentioned tools as stated bellow:

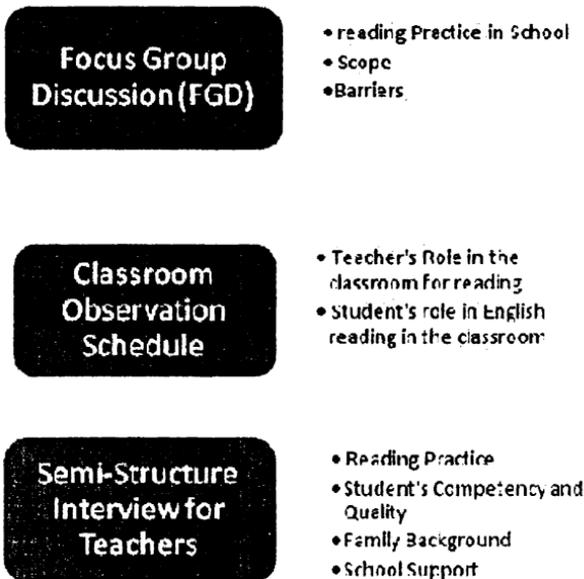


Figure 2: Conceptual Framework for Reading Literacy

4. Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature because descriptive data have been collected and the collected data will answer the following research question:

- a) what types of activities are offered for the learners for reading practice at school and at home
- b) what challenges are faced by the learners to develop their reading literacy and
- c) what should be the required measures for developing reading literacy of the learners

Therefore, qualitative approach is followed throughout the study. Before fixing up the research questions some relevant literatures have been reviewed and present situation is considered logically. Due to the limitations, the study is carried out only in Dhaka division of Bangladesh. All the primary level students and the English teachers are the population of this study. Six schools have been selected randomly from Dhaka city (three from metropolitan area and the other three from outside of city area). Data have been gathered from the teachers through semi-structured interview questions and FGD agendas from the students. From the selected schools, only the English course teachers are considered as sample for the semi-structured interview. From each school, 6 students (3 Boys and 3 Girls) are selected purposively for FGD (Focus Group Discussion). However, the total FGD settings are 6 in numbers and the total number of respondent is 36. A classroom observation schedule was also been developed. After data collection, data have been transcribed, translated and coded. Under each code there are some sub-codes according to conceptual framework. For validation, data triangulation, intra-coded and inter-coded reliability have taken into consideration. Finally, data have been analyzed thematically.

4.1 Sampling design at a glimpse

Research tools	Participants	Sample Size	Sampling	Data analysis
Semi Structure Interview questions	Teachers	6	Purposively	Thematic analysis technique will be adopted for this study.
FGD Schedule (6)	Students	36 18 boys & 18 girls	Purposively	
Observation Schedule	Classroom	6	Purposively	

5. Findings and Discussion

Data have been collected through developed questionnaire designed for the study. Classroom observation schedule is used to extract the real classroom scenario of reading practices where the role of the teachers and the function of the students are revealed. Moreover, semi-structured questionnaire for interview and FGD agendas are used for the teachers as well as for the students for obtaining the total scenario of English reading at primary school and at home as well. The detail findings are described below according to the tools with themes.

5.1 Findings from classroom practice observation

During the classroom practice observation our main focus is on reading practices. Therefore, all the activities related to reading practices have been taken into account. Finally, the classroom activity has divided into two separate segments. One is to observe the role of teacher and the other one is the role of the students. In these report both segment's role have described coherently. In the classroom the main focusing area is the role of the teachers as well as the role of the students. The key terms are identified according to the use of materials, pronunciation, engaging the students, relation between the students and the teachers as well as the extemporaneous response of the students and their active participation.

5.1.1 Teacher's role in the classroom for reading

The teacher has designed his/her class according to the lesson. From most of the observation it has found that the teacher has started the class with a "welcome song". Then there have some significant differences among their practices. Some teachers have used to read the lesson first by himself/ herself. Then s/he has asked the students to read the text aloud with their teacher. Simultaneously, the teacher has identified the new words from the text and has written those new words on the blackboard with meaning and has asked the students to read out the words from the textbook as well as match it with the meaning from the blackboard and finally has instructed them to write down the given words on their note book.

After identifying the new words, the teacher has written these new words on the blackboard with meaning. After finishing reading by the

students, the teacher has formed some groups with the students and has asked them to read the lesson carefully with understanding the meaning. From each group, teachers nominate one leader and provide some questions from the text book.

At that times teacher has provided both silent and aloud reading. Whenever students have read then teacher moves around the classroom and provides feedback to the students in their pronunciation, meaning and understanding. In each group there may be some weak students. Teacher probes the group leader to help their friends and s/he supports him/her with a special care. At that times teacher has called someone in the front desk and asked him/ her to read loudly where the other students followed him/her.

Moreover, the time spending for reading is very short because the scheduled class time is only for 35-40 minutes. To reach each and every student, it is not possible and the weak students are not got proper support from the classroom. Since the English classes are mostly taken at the first period and there is some additional activities like warm up, roll calling, organization of the students as well as within this time teacher has to check their homework. As, teachers have to engage with the task of writing, presenting, assessing, providing feedback, motivating the students as well as reading which are not the only tasks in the classroom and thus, they get very little time for reading practice.

From the classroom observation, it has been found that, the teacher has engaged them in various activities like group work, pair work and individual work for reading. But the scope of providing individual feedback which is much better than individual aloud reading because, from this practice teacher can hear the student's voice so easily that s/he can make instantaneous correction where necessary. From each group, teachers have only asked a single student to read aloud and say others to listen to him/her. Almost all the group work and pair work of reading is the preparation for writing question-answer. Some pair works have found where both the pair members are asked to read loudly. But these are also done randomly not by the all pairs. On the other hand, the most interesting finding from this study is that the quality of the English teachers. Some teachers have problem in standard pronunciation as well as in using English grammar that leads

the learners to learn in wrong ways. Beyond this, some students do not pay any attention on careful reading during their classroom practice but the teacher cannot provide them any instantaneous support.

5.1.2 Student's role in the classroom for reading

It is a common concept that students are the very important part in a classroom. Basically they do everything according to the instruction of their teacher. Various activities of the students have been noticed from the classroom observation. Students read with their teacher. At first, the teacher reads a sentence then the students read in chorus. Then at certain time, teacher asks them to identify the difficult words. They also practice pair work, group work and even individual work.

The role of the students in reading within a group is very conventional. Some of them are inactive and there has no special attempt for them from the group. They simply sit with opening the text book and when the teacher visits to their group then they try to show that they are engaging with reading but do not ask any question to their teacher. At that time if the teacher asks any of an individual student then they open their mouth. But a very few of them ask question eagerly to their teacher. From the each group, the students who can pronounce well they always become leaders of the respective groups.

After reading, the teacher provides them some questions to evaluate their understanding. But after finishing their writing, teacher cannot check all students' tasks. When teacher has written the answers on the blackboard then they match these words with their own answers. Dialogue and self-initiated speaking are also practiced in the classroom by the students. Even, after their reading and answering the questions, they read out their answer that also helps them in English reading as well as in good pronunciation.

5.2 Findings from Teacher's Interview

A semi-structured interview question has been used for the teachers. The content of the interview question has related to their current practices and factors affecting for reading practices in the classroom. The findings are mentioned below:

5.2.1 Reading practice in the classroom

Only six teachers have been interviewed. They have expressed the same opinion that they practice reading usually everyday but the time they spend for reading is not fixed. The scope of reading is common for the English 1st paper (the main text book). Within 40 minutes class, they spend their time in reading according to the following pie chart.

Half of the respondents have expressed that they spend 10 minutes every day in reading in an English classroom. The second highest numbers of respondents spend 15 minutes while the rest spend 20 minutes in reading every day. During reading practices, teachers generally provide group work, pair work and individual work. Besides the nature of reading, practices are both aloud and silent reading. But one of the teachers said,

For primary grade, the mode of aloud reading is more effective than the silent reading but through aloud reading of every individual, it creates a big noise in the classroom as there are huge students in a small classroom. Therefore, it takes few minutes to control the situation. So, I personally provide group and pair work. It makes me easy to evaluate the students as well as I could maintain the classroom. Because there is a chance to support the weak students by their group or pair mate. I also asked them to cross-check their writing by each other.

Figure 3

Time spends for reading

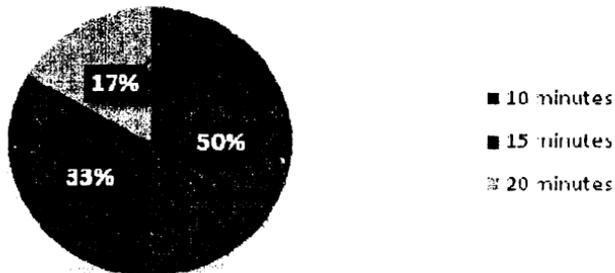


Figure 3: Time spends for reading in an English classroom at primary school

All the teachers agreed that the textbook that are prescribed for grade-V, is good but there are some difficult words. Half of the teachers thought that, the class time is not enough to teach a foreign language like English especially for the learners of elementary level.

5.2.2 Students competency and quality

Most of the teachers opine the same thought about the competency and quality of students at primary level. This is the common scenario of primary school students of grade-V.

‘The students are capable to continue with the prescribed textbook of English and their quality is in the average level. They all can read but face difficulties in uttering some words. They all can easily understand the text. Students also have problems understanding word meaning. But the teachers think, the situation is not created by the students. Teachers believe that students need proper support from their surroundings; such as from their teachers, their parents as well as from their friends.’

However, the factors affecting English reading literacy are as follows:

Family Background

According to the response of most of the teachers (respondents), in govt. primary schools the students are mostly come from the low income families and their parents are not vigilant about the education of their children. Parents who are literate, cognizant and economically solvent usually tend to send their children at Kindergarten schools with private cost at their area instead of govt. primary school. They also take proper care of their children. Although it is vary from the rural area. One of the head teachers said,

Most of the parents are day labor and rickshaw puller. They are always tensed about managing their family expenses. They are not properly literate in English. To support their children at home even some of them are not capable to facilitate private tuition. Besides they have to support their household activities. Some parents send them for house worker. Some of them send their children at school only for the stipend they got from the government. Very few of them think that their children will be in the prestigious position in future.

Teachers think parents should allow their children to learn at least one new word in every day and that must be related with their real life and help them to form sentences. But the starting word must be with a simple word.

Students who spend most of the time at home, thus the support from their family is very vital. They need some additional materials like:

dictionary; to learn English better. Teachers think the parents are not capable enough to provide their basic needs. They also think the support of additional materials are implausible. Teachers said, the students who read at their home regularly, they become good at English. But students at the rural areas get fewer opportunities outside the classroom and they seldom read by their own interest". Without proper support from the family environment it is very challenging for a student to attain the target of reading literacy as well as education.

One of the teachers said,

The students who are academically weak generally sit in the back benches. They do not come in the front bench even there are available seat vacancies. Most of them are from the families where the parents have no nuisance about their children's education.

School Support

About school facilities the teachers have said that, school will provide trained teachers, good infrastructural facilities, necessary teaching-learning materials, recreation facilities and an enriched school library. In some schools, the number of teacher is not sufficient. Most of the teachers are not properly trained even they are not from English background. Some of them only get the subject based training where the newly appointed teachers have no training. Besides, they have to take classes of another subject.

At present there is a new system of continuous assessment. It is for listening, speaking, reading and writing. The teachers are still in the dark about the continuous assessment. The communication between the teachers and the parents is very pitiable. Along with this, class teachers have to maintain some administrative work that hampers their academic responsibilities towards students.

Necessary teaching-learning materials are not available in schools. Printed materials for supporting reading are inadequate. In some schools there is no sufficient electricity. In some schools, computers are available without projectors support. As a result, students fail to avail the proper use of multimedia.

5.3 Findings of the Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

A range of Focus Group Discussions have been carried out with the students. Some important information have found from the FGD with

the students. Those are mentioned below:

- For English 1st paper class, the students get many opportunities for reading but for English 2nd paper this opportunity is very rare. Whenever teacher provides composition, letter or paragraph, only then the teachers ask them for reading. The practice of reading is very common task in a class for every day.
- Reading is interesting. Through reading they can understand the meaning and main theme of the text. It helps them to reply to the question. It enriches their vocabulary, develop their sentence formation skill and enhance their reading speed. One of the respondent said,

“Reading is the key point of understanding any text. It provides us the gist of the information and helps us to participate in the competition and even in the examination. It generates reading habit. Acquisition of knowledge depends on good reading habit. Therefore, it enriches our knowledge”.

- Teachers generally provide group work, pair work and individual work of reading. But they feel much better in group work. Because they think, in a group they can share everything and can ask for help to our friends. It is very much approachable. Some of them feel shy and fear to ask anything to the teacher.
- Time allocation for reading is not adequate. In the classroom there are the students of different category. Everyday only 10-15 minutes time is spent for reading. Within this short time it is not possible to offer the scope of reading for every student. Therefore, the weak students are staying behind.
- Students enjoy reading but sometimes they feel trouble due to the new and difficult English words. Teachers advise to read only the textbook but the instructions are not given to read more supplementary materials for their self-development and pleasure. Basically, supplementary materials are the materials those are used to support to fulfill the gaps and to make the lesson easier, associated to the text book. That means the materials that are not the text book but help to learn the text easily.

- According to the students, only few teachers use authentic materials from real life situation. Other additional authentic materials are— newspapers, magazines, articles etc. will enhance their reading literacy.
- Nowadays, almost every student has private instructor but still there are some families who are economically insolvent to provide instructors for their children. They do not have any chance to practice English outside of classroom as their parents are also illiterate in English.
- Use of teaching materials is not satisfactory. In a month, teacher use materials only 2/3 times. The materials are used by teachers made. They said,
“We think if more relevant materials can manage for us, then the classroom will be more fruitful, joyful, participatory and attractive. Although we have some personal and economical barriers but extra supports from the school may lead us to our destination”.
- Students should practice English reading at home. Some of them get support from their parents, some of them from their elder brother/sister, some of them from their house tutor and some of them from their cousins. Because there is no other person to support them outside the school. But if they feel the necessity of additional help for English outside the English classroom for their better understanding and to overcome difficulties, then school library is mandatory for their additional enhancement.

5.4 Discussion

Findings of this research identify some similarities with a few previous studies. From the study, the students expect that, systematic and appropriate support from school help them to achieve their goal overcoming their family, environmental and economic barriers. The findings of this study are similar to those of a study by Geske & Ozolo (2008). Teachers believe that, students those who are weak in reading they are also academically weak and they cannot speak fluently. If the students will read more, they will learn more. But the text should be their life oriented specially related to their day to day life. The similar finding has also found in a research conducted by Abraham & Gram (2009).

According to the findings of the study, students of Govt. primary schools are mostly dependent on their teacher for developing reading skill and they feel the crisis of supportive learning materials. Most of them have no chance to practice reading outside the classroom where they think the self-directed reading is very important to develop their reading skill. These are the barriers or affecting factors for reading. Chomchaiya and Dunworth have conducted a research in (2008) and also have found almost the same findings.

Reading helps the students to understand the gist of the text. They feel better if they read the text with their self-intension. It never conducts to identify the few new words and their meaning. Afreen and Masum (2014) have conducted a research and have also revealed the similar findings.

Family environment and friends can play a dynamic role in developing reading literacy. From these sources the students can get support instantly. But these sources do not encourage our learners for their self-directed reading. Chomchaiya and Dunworth (2008) have also found the similar findings.

As this study finds, the teachers think that parents should play a vital role to develop the reading literacy of their children at the early stage with offering the chance of reading other materials beyond the textbook. They will encourage them to learn new words and make sentences.

6. Recommendations

This study explores that the literacy of English reading among the primary level students is bestowed with different factors. Those are related to the quality of the English teachers, family environment and support, school facilities and students personal intension. However, based on the findings of the research, the following suggestions are important:

- Stories incorporated in the textbook must be student's real life oriented and the text must contain information as well as the funny messages.
- In the school, teachers should practice two (2) new words every day. Students will memorize it and use it at home. Finally, they will form sentences using the words.

- Parents meeting should be held on regular basis. From the meeting teacher will uphold the result of their children. At the same time parents will tell them about the weakness of their son/daughter. Finally, teacher will help them to manage their children easily and to develop their English competencies at home.
- Every school requires having a library. Necessary supplementary teaching materials and reading materials like: dictionary, magazine, newspaper, story books, novels etc. must be available there.
- Necessary training should be arranged for the teachers. Teachers need to be updated. Necessary teaching-learning materials should be available in the school and teacher -student's ratio should not be exceeded the logical limit.
- Marks should be allocated for reading skill. Assessment for reading literacy should be separated from the term-final examination.
- In the classroom, opportunity of reading should be managed for all. For primary students reading aloud should be introduced and it should be compulsory.
- Workload of the teachers should be reduced and subject wise teacher will be appointed for a particular subject.

7. Conclusion

In this study, we have found that English teachers are very friendly to support the learners but they have some limitations such as: time engagement for teacher's training, lack of reading materials, excessive workload, huge number of students, and so on. But teachers try to practice reading every day in the English class and try to apply some special techniques for covering all the students in reading like peer work, group work along with allowing the students to interact with each other. Both the teachers and the students expect to have a school library, school garden and sports materials in every school, then students could overcome reading barriers by reading library books or reading from practical situation oriented life. In a nutshell, the proposed recommendations will help the students, as well as the teachers, and the parents. Even the educational department will take necessary measures to overcome the existing challenges and to

develop the present situation. Moreover we believe, a further study may carry out regarding student's reading skill and school's facilities or involvement of parents in reading practices.

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Semi Structured Interview Questions for Teacher

[Confidentiality will be maintained for personal identities]

Name of the respondent:
Affiliated School Name:
Subject:
Phone number:

1. Do you practice English reading skill in the classroom?

yes no

If yes, please explain how much time do you spend for?

.....

How do you practice English reading in the classroom?

.....

Do you think that students are good at reading English? Please explain why?

.....

Do you think that all the students have equal competency in reading?

yes no

Explain why?

.....

What do you think about their level of English reading?

Static Moderate Satisfactory

2. Are there any specific reasons behind reading difficulties?

.....

Is there any social, family or economic impact for reading difficulties?

.....

.....

What are the main factors that affecting for English reading?

.....

What are the initiatives to overcome these challenges?

.....