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The main objective of this study is to measure the present status of Bangla reading fluency with understanding of grade III students at the Government Primary Schools (GPS) in Bangladesh. To meet these research objectives, we used explanatory sequential mixed methods design with multistage cluster sampling strategies. Through quantitative analysis it is found that students scored on an average 2.34 (out of 4) in reading seen text and 1.29 (out of 3) in reading unseen text. In addition, students can read 48 words per minute with 80% comprehension. It is also found that the major causes of gaps in achieving reading skills are- students' inability to identify the alphabet, break joint letters, make words and make sentences. To overcome this situation teachers can conduct a baseline survey at the beginning of the academic year and support students continuously to reach the mark. Besides, teachers can follow the teachers' guide (TG) of NCTB in Bangla language teaching.

Key words: Reading fluency, Joint letter, Scaffolding, Primary Education, Bangladesh

Background of the study

Bangladesh, a developing country with a high density of population aspires to develop through the use of human resources. To build quality human resources, it is essential to have in place a quality education system. The National Education Policy-2010 and Revised National Curriculum-2012 emphasize achieving a national benchmark regarding literacy issues. The policy stated "to take effective steps to ensure the acquisition of essential knowledge, subject-based knowledge, life skills, attitudes, values and the sense of social awareness to meet the basic learning needs that will enable them to move ahead to the next level of education"(Ministry of Education , 2012). In the national curriculum, Bangla has been used as an instructional language for most of the subjects' to attain subject knowledge. To have a sound knowledge in reading and comprehending the Bangla language; and to attain the basic language skills of Bangla, five sub-skills – letter knowledge, phonemic awareness, reading fluency, vocabulary, reading with comprehension have been addressed systematically in Bangla textbooks (National Curriculum and Textbook Board, 2012).

Effective literacy skills open the doors to more educational and employment opportunities so that people are able to pull themselves out of poverty and underemployment (Project Literacy, 2020). Helping someone to read and write effectively or to acquire the basic skills, improves the future of everyone in society. Literacy is critical to economic development as well as individual and community well-being. However, Bangladesh has been struggling to establish an efficient, inclusive and equitable primary education system for all children since its independence in 1971. In addition, Bangladesh faces many other challenges in ensuring sufficient achievement for all students in the primary education sector. In this situation, many arguments have been made that the students in government primary schools are not sufficiently competent in their native language (Bangla) subject. For example, the report of National Student Assessment (NSA) for grade three shows that students with sufficient reading ability were 75 percent in 2013 while it was 68 percent in 2015 and 74 percent in 2017 (Directorate of Primary Education, 2018). Though student reading ability shows in NSA 2015 was 68 percent but the score of reading with understanding is not at expected level. For example according to World Development Report-2018, 43 percent students of grade three could not answer simple questions from reading a Bangla passage in 2015. Moreover, in 2017 when the grade III students reached grade V two years later, their performance was 88 percent, scored below the expected score for class V in Bangla (World Bank, 2018). Regarding these aspects, researchers sought to

explore the gaps between reading and reading with answering by following questions.

Language teaching in a primary school classroom is highly systematic which needed professional development for teachers so that they can arrange an effective language teaching approach. The purpose of teaching native language at primary level is to help students to develop competence in all four language skills through meaningful and enjoyable activities (National Curriculum and Textbook Board [NCTB], 2012). Listening, speaking, reading and writing skills are important for a child to succeed in his/her study life. According to Richards (2006), it is the age of communication and effective communication is one of the most important skills that every student should possess.

Reading is a vital but complex cognitive process. While we often think of reading as one singular act, our brains remain actually engaged in a number of tasks simultaneously each time (The five essential components of reading, 2018). According to them, there are five aspects to the process of reading: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, reading comprehension and fluency. These five aspects work together to create the reading experience. As children learn to read they must develop skills in all five of these areas in order to become successful readers.

Study Context of the Study

The government is trying to ensure quality education to form the basic level of students through primary education. They took different initiatives for tracking its development in the last few decades. For example, the National Education Policy 2010 and National Curriculum 2012 set a different benchmark for developing language skills of primary students from curriculum to textbooks where reading is treated as an emphasized area. Developed countries like OECD countries are assessing their students' performance through the PISA exam. Similarly, in Bangladesh, students' performance on reading in Bangla is assessed through the National Students Assessment (NSA). Bangla is a compulsory subject at primary level and every exam including Primary Education Completion Examination (PECE) assesses the students' two skills (reading and writing) out of four basic skills of language through paper-pencil tests. Students scored well in PECE exam while they achieved a poor score in the NSA.

Regarding these aspects, the Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MoPME) feels the need to know the causes of learning gaps between the assessment processes. After that National Academy for Primary Education (NAPE) conducted a study to identify the reading ability of class four students of government primary schools. It is assumed by the

government, that most students of class three can't read Bangla at an expected level that is cited in National Curriculum 2012. The government is keen to explore the causes behind this situation. That's why the MoPME gave the responsibility to the NAPE to conduct this study on Bangla Subject in order to find out the causes of weakness in Bangla of grade three students at Government Primary Schools (GPS).

Rational of the Study

The ability to read is fundamental for overall academic success which positively affects life outcomes. Yet, in most of the countries of the developing world the literacy rate is lagging. While efforts over the past two decades have resulted in substantially increased enrollment, but quality of education has not improved significantly, particularly in the early grades. Research has shown that students who do not learn to read in the first few grades are more likely to repeat and eventually get dropped out from school, as a result the education attainment gap between readers and nonreaders increases over time.

Reading fluency is important for bridging word recognition and comprehension. Fluent reader can understand the inner meaning, in line and between line meanings of the text. Non-fluent readers mostly struggle with decoding so they cannot concentrate on the meaning or understand what the text means. Moreover, reading fluency is also important to link between early and later reading phases (International Letiracy Association, 2018).

Different national and international organizations including individual researchers conducted studies on students' performance in Bangla reading. Such as in 2013, Save the Children undertook a cross-country analysis in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Malawi, Mozambique, Nepal, Pakistan, and Zimbabwe to measure the equity impact of Literacy Boost. This study stated that in Bangladesh, a student can read 28 words fluently in a minute and their accuracy rate was 83.1%. In addition, students scored in reading comprehension on an average 1.7 while the allocated score was 10 (Sayed, Guajardo, Hossain , & Gertsch, 2014). Another study conducted by the IED, BRACU in 2016 entitled *"Baseline Survey of the Innovation for Improving Early Grade Reading Activity (IIEGRA) project"* areas of seven Upazilas in Khagrachori and Cox's Bazar districts. This study stated that in Bangladesh, a student can read 54 words per minute (WPM) and their accuracy rate was 85.6%. In addition, students were scored in reading comprehension on an average 5.9 while the allocated score was 10(Shimu, Kalam, & Hossain, 2016).

All of these studies were conducted in early grade (class one & two) area by different non-government organizations. That's why it is important

to know the reading status of grade three students after completing the early grade through reading rate of words per minute (WPM) and the level of comprehension.
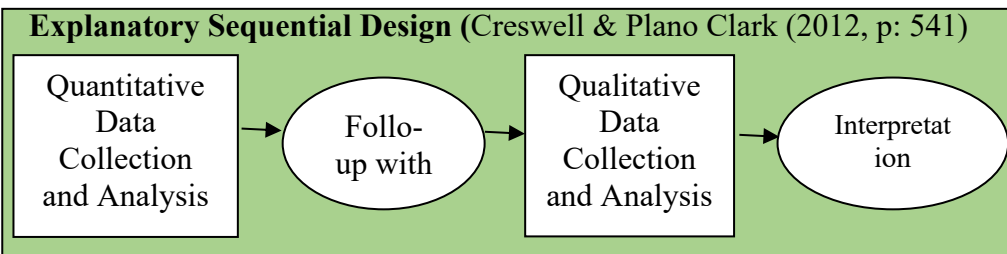
Objectives of this Study

The main objective of this study is to measure the present status of Bangla reading fluency with understanding of grade III students at the Government Primary Schools (GPS) in Bangladesh. Besides, this study also tried to explore the weaknesses and remedies for achieving reading skills of grade III students. The specific objectives of this study are:

- to find out the present status in achieving Bangla reading skills
- to identify the causes of gaps in achieving reading skills
- to find out the remedial measures in achieving good reading skills

Methodology

To meet these research objectives, we used explanatory sequential mixed methods design with multistage cluster sampling strategies. According to Creswell, (2012), *'an explanatory sequential mixed methods design* (also called a two-phase model; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) *consists of first collecting quantitative data and then collecting qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results'* (p.542). The researchers prioritized the quantitative data more than qualitative data and quantitative data was collected first followed by qualitative data sequentially. The researchers analyzed the data separately; first quantitative data and then qualitative data thematically.

Explanatory Sequential Design (Creswell & Plano Clark (2012, p: 541)

| Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis | → | Follo-up with | → | Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis | → | Interpretation |

As per methodology, the study has been conducted in different phases. In the first phase, the researchers used an achievement test to identify the students' learning level on reading skills of Bangla language for grade III students. In the follow-up stage, students' level of learning and areas of gaps were ascertained from the quantitative analysis. These analyses helped to determine the activities of phase two. In the final phase, the researchers interviewed the teachers to find out the causes of students' learning deficiencies and gaps in reading skills. Moreover, the researchers conducted a focus group discussion with the students to add extra

information for the research objectives. The use of multiple methods allowed the researchers to triangulate the data and add rigor, breadth and depth to explore the real-life situations of both urban and rural students in the government primary schools in Bangladesh.

In the 1st phase, to select the sample students, multistage cluster sampling procedure was followed. A total of 8 districts were selected, one from each division considering various geographical (Plain land, Haor, Hilly and Costal) locations. From each selected district, one Upazila was selected from the Upazila list randomly. A total of 16 Government Primary Schools (GPS) were selected, two from each Upazila where one was located in an urban area and one was in a rural area and the selection was done through a random sampling technique. From those selected schools, a total number of 394 students of grade three (following the equation of Cochran, 1963 considering 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error) were selected where 24-26 students of class III were selected randomly from each school. In the 2nd phase, two FGDs were scheduled in each school which was selected in the 1st phase. Where one FGD was done with 5/6 advanced students and another one was done with 5/6 weaker students who were selected purposively. In addition, a total number of 16 teachers (who taught Bangla) were selected using purposive sampling techniques for conducting an interview. Finally, the collected quantitative data were analysed through descriptive statistics by applying SPSS and qualitative data were analysed thematically which emerged from research objectives.

Findings

The findings of this study have been presented following the research objectives.

Present scenario of reading skills

Students were assessed through seen text and unseen text. A poem was adopted from textbook whereas another text was adopted from supplementary reading materials (maintaining grade wise difficulty) to measure the students' reading skills through loud reading, silent reading with understanding. Researchers provided two set of text (one set for seen text and another set for unseen text) to the students followed by three domain (Knowledge, Understanding, and Application) based Multiple Choose Questions (MCQ). The instruction for students, was read the text with understanding and answer the following questions. Mainly the item was arranged maintaining the sequence of knowledge, then understanding and application.

Table 1: Overall performance of reading

Area	Seen text	Unseen text
Mean	2.34 (out of 4)	1.29 (out of 3)
SD	1.224	0.876
Minimum scored	6.2%	18.6%
Maximum scored	21.6%	9.4%

The above table shows that the mean score of silent reading (seen text) was 2.34 (out of 4) whereas the standard deviation was 1.224. It also found that 21.6% students scored 4 out of 4 while about only 6.2% students cannot scored. Conversely, the mean score of silent reading (unseen text) was 1.29 (out of 3) whereas the standard deviation was 0.876. Data show that 9.4% students scored 3 out of 3 while about only 18.6% students cannot score.
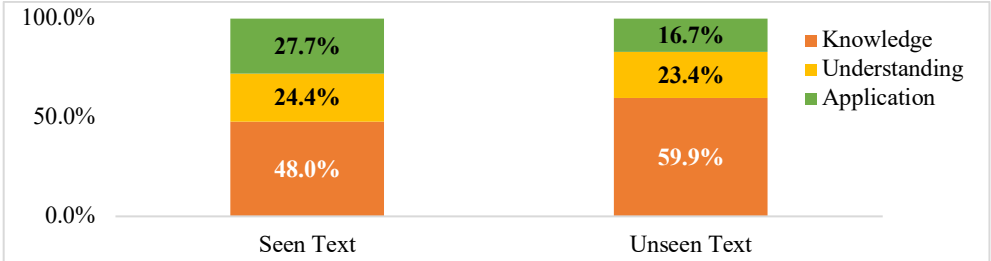

Figure 1: Domain-based reading performance

Mainly students perform better in knowledge level question than understanding and application level questions for both seen and unseen text. In seen text, 48.0% of students responded correctly knowledge-based items while 59.9% of students answered similar items in unseen text. In addition, 24.4% of students responded correctly in understanding based items of seen text while 23.4% of students answered in similar items correctly in unseen text. Moreover, 27.7% of students responded correctly application level-based items of seen text while 16.7% of students answered correctly in similar items of unseen text.
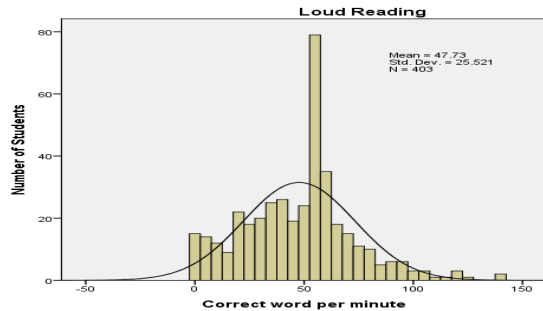
Figure 2: Reading fluency

The above figure shows the students' reading fluency. Data show that students' read loudly the provided text on an average 48 word per minute (wpm). The standard deviation for reading fluency is 25.521 which means that variation of students' performance was high in reading fluency.

Causes of gaps in achieving reading skills

Through teachers' interview, the researchers wanted to explore why students' performance is poor in reading. Most of the teachers identified that mainly students are not able to identify the alphabet, not able to make words with the help of alphabet, not able to make the joint letter (two letters are joint together) and not able to make sentences with the help of words. For example, a teacher stated *"mainly students are poor in reading due to lack of proper guideline at grade one and two. In addition, I tried to teach the students from the beginning while they cannot adapt themselves to my lecture"* (TIR$_{31}$). Moreover, one of the teachers stated:

> I think the problem comes from grade one and two. Students get a promotion without achieving learning outcomes of the previous grade like identifying the alphabet, making words, braking joint letters and making sentences. The teachers of grade one and two might not identify the students' weakness in Bangla that is why we faced such kind of challenges in upper grade (TIU $_{21, 51, 71, 81}$).

In Bangla class at GPS, mostly teachers conducted lessons with emphasis on reading skills. For example, to present a story or essay or descriptive text, teachers read loudly at first then teach word meaning, breaking joint letters, making sentences and writing summary. During teachers' interview, a teacher from urban GPS mentioned "*I make student attentive at class, then read loudly with proper pronunciation and student match the words with their book after listening to me. I call 3/4 student in front of the class to read as I read and other students listen*" (TIU$_{81}$).

Teachers assess the students reading skills following different strategies. Almost all teachers mentioned that they assess students reading

skill by asking to read. Most of the teachers mentioned that they generally ask the student to read the content which is a part of the textbook already taught at the classroom. A small number of teachers *'ask student to read one by one'* (TIU_{61}) and ask simple questions from reading as teacher mentioned that *'I ask simple question related to the reading materials to evaluate students reading skill at classroom'* (TIU_{81}).

There is no book corner in any classroom while teachers claimed that they have sufficient books for students at the library. That is why students cannot collect easily. For example, a teacher said, *"we have a bookshelf at the office room and every Wednesday we provide books to the students"* (TIU_{11}). Another teacher claimed, *"schools have sufficient books for students. If students need any book for reading, we provide them from our bookshelf"* (TIU_{82}). Conversely, students pointed out that they have no opportunity to read supplementary reading materials (SRM) except textbooks. During FGD, most of the students mentioned *"There is no book corner and SRM at their classroom"* (FGD_{22})

Most of the schools have supplementary reading materials (SRM) at the teachers' room that's why students have no opportunity to receive this SRM. During teacher's interview, similar opinion came from a teacher. He mentioned, *"We have SRM in the school and provide the students supplementary reading materials when they want"* (TIU_{81}). Another teacher said

> SRM is needed for teachers to conduct the class in an effective way. Students are busy with their textbook related reading and home work. They have not enough time to read supplementary reading materials without textbook. So I encourage them to read textbooks for getting good marks in final exam (TIU_{51}).

During FGD, students identified different issues regarding book corner and supplementary reading materials (SRM) like:

- *No book corner at our classroom* ($FGD_{61, 81, 62, 91, 92, 51, 32, 82}$)
- *We did not receive any other book except textbooks from our teachers* (FGD_{82})
- *Mainly, we read textbooks at home, not other books* ($FGD_{21, 31}$)
- *We love to read textbooks and teachers inspired us to read textbooks* (FGD_{41})
- *Our schools have some story books at teachers room* ($FGD_{51, 82}$)

Remedial measures to minimize the gaps in achieving reading skills

During teachers' interview, the researchers wanted to know the possible solution to overcome these challenges for developing reading skills of Bangla. They mentioned as follows:

- **Regular attendance:** Students' regular attendance is important to fulfill their learning need. During teacher interview a teacher mentioned *"If I wanted to ensure our students' learning needs, firstly we have to ensure their regular attendance. If a student is absent from class for two-three days continuously, s/he will miss the flow of language learning. Because one lesson is connected with others"* (TIU $_{82}$).

- **Subject based training:** Most of the teachers mentioned that they needed subject-based training in a proper manner. Most of them emphasize increasing the duration of training. For example, a teacher for rural primary school stated *"Duration of subject-based training has to be increased 6 days to 15 days or more and should be ensured for all Bangla subject teachers"* (TIR$_{21}$). In addition, a teacher pointed out *"subject-based training has to be conducted properly with sincerity"* (TIU$_{72}$).

- **Teachers' motivation:** Motivation is an important technique for better teaching and learning. Continuous common activities make a man bored. That is why sometimes they need variation in their activities like, professional development training, extra increment etc. Similarly a teacher said *"For better achievement of language skills, teachers have to meet the requirements sincerely, heartily and cordial"* (TIR$_{22}$).

- **Recruitment of subject-based teachers:** In general, a teacher conducts various classes in different subjects from grade one to five in an academic year. Every teacher is not expert in all subjects. A demand comes from the school is that *"For these upgraded curriculum, it is a national demand to recruit subject-based teacher for betterment and to fulfill students' learning needs"* (TIR$_{32}$). Correspondingly another teacher mentioned *"We have to ensure a dedicated teacher for each subject and one teacher will teach Bangla from class one to class five"* (TIR$_{22}$).

- **Teacher-student ratio:** Due to large class size, none of the activities can be conducted appropriately. It is impossible to conduct language class with modern language teaching methods and techniques because of high ratio of teacher and students. Similarly a teacher pointed out that *"we have to ensure teacher students ration in a logical manner"* (TIU$_{82}$).

- **Parents' awareness:** Parents' awareness is essential to ensure students' better performance. Schools can arrange various programs for developing parents' awareness regarding students' performance.

For example, a teacher said *"We have to arrange parents meeting in a month as we need some program for developing parents' awareness regarding students' performance"* (TIR$_{61}$). Similarly, another teacher stated *"Parents have to feel concerned about their child's education"* (TIR$_{51}$).

- **Language assessment policy:** Government has to introduce an assessment policy for primary schools especially for language learning. . Mainly, teachers are assessing the students' four language skills through a paper-pencil test although mostly it is not possible to measure listening and speaking skill with this model at all. Similarly, a teacher pointed out: "*we need an assessment policy for measuring four language skills at primary level. Now we are not capable of assessing listening and speaking skills through the paper-pencil test. That is why we avoid these two skills from our formal and summative assessment. I think, the government had to give positive attention regarding this issue*" (TUI $_{82}$)

- **Teaching strategy:** Language skill development depends on practice. Teacher's guide published by NCTB emphasized reading practice on classroom teaching learning activity like teachers' ideal reading when students listen carefully, students' loud reading, students' reading repeat after teacher, practice of reading understanding, choral reading, guided reading, and independent reading. For example, a teacher said *"We have to follow teachers' guide (TG) of NCTB in teaching Bangla"* (TIR$_{61}$). Reading will be assessed according to learning outcomes.

Discussion

This study found that students scored on an average 2.34 (out of 4) in reading seen text and 1.29 (out of 3) in reading unseen text. It also found that 21.6% students scored 4 out of 4 in reading seen text and only 9.4% students scored 3 out of 3 in reading unseen text. Similarly Shimu, Kalam, & Hossain (2016) stated that students scored in reading comprehension on an average 5.9 out of 10. So, we interpret that students can score 50% of total marks in reading comprehension. This study also explores that students can read 48 words per minute while similar findings were found in another study they pointed out that a student can read 54 words per minute (WPM) and their accuracy rate was 85.6% (Shimu, Kalam, & Hossain, 2016). However, a different scenario was found in another study which explored that a student can read 28 words fluently in a minute and their accuracy rate was 83.1% (Sayed, Guajardo, Hossain & Gertsch, 2014). Though, there is

no recognized fluency benchmark for Bangla which may help us to compare students' reading fluency.

This study explores that in primary schools Bangla classroom activities are conducted mostly with the emphasis of reading and writing skills. In Bangla class the teacher reads loudly with proper pronunciation and students match the words with their textbook while reading, sometime students repeat after teacher then teach word meaning, breaking joint letters, making sentences and asking students to write summary, asking students to write words, joint letters, making sentences and simple questions, the teacher writes one demo line to follow, gives home work to do (write one page); asks to write answers of simple questions. According to Sadiku (2015), students need opportunities to develop their reading skills. Developing students' competencies in reading requires exposing students to gradually challenging reading materials. The aim is making students read effectively.

During FDG students specified that teachers read and ask to listen and repeat after teacher, ask to read, teach exercise after reading, teach new words, spelling and word meaning, ask to memorize the poem. Most of the teachers didn't teach picture related text, ask to write after showing the picture, and ask to write from text. To overcome the situation, the National Curriculum and Text Book Board (NCTB) suggested in Teachers Guide (TG) for using different methods and techniques for the development of reading skills such as- (a) using 'top-down' method; (b) scaffolding in guided reading and independent reading; (c) follow correct pronunciation, appropriate speed and punctuation marks in reading; (d) exercise silent reading for understanding, use flashcard/word card for vocabulary resource development; (e) ask to read out of textbook, newspaper, and magazine. (Alam, Begum , Zibran, & Ahsan , 2016). Almost all teachers assess students' reading skill by asking to read, generally asking students to read the content which is a part of textbook already taught in classroom, ask students to read one by one and ask simple questions from reading.

This study explores that most of the schools have supplementary reading materials (SRM) which are preserved in the teachers' room and students have no opportunity to receive that SRM. Although a teacher mentioned that SRM is needed by teachers to conduct the class in an effective way. Students are busy with their textbook related reading and home work. They have not enough time to read supplementary materials without textbook. Though the Report Card Survey- 2016 found similar findings. Data show that SRM facilities are decreasing gradually. Sixty five percent respondents replied negatively in the question of whether the school

has SRM or not whether it was 71% in 2015 and half of the respondents claimed that their schools have no library facilities (CAMPE, 2017).

Recommendations

Finally the research team recommended:

- Identify the weakness of students reading in Bangla through baseline survey at the beginning of the academic year and scaffold them continuously to reach the mark according to survey.
- Teachers' have to follow teachers' edition of NCTB for Bangla language teaching. In addition, s/he can follow the annual and daily lesson plan provided by the NAPE.
- Ensure formative assessment to assess reading skills at classroom.
- Teachers can encourage the students to read more books along with textbooks. Government has to ensure making book corner in every classroom and providing supplementary reading materials (SRM) for each school.
- Recruit subject-based teacher to fulfill learning needs of primary students. In addition, the management has to assign one specific teacher for grade one to five for teaching Bangla.
- Government has to ensure gradually subject-based training (Bangla) for every teacher in a proper manner and the duration of training should be increased.

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