Students' Performance in Reading with Understanding in English at Grade Four: A Scenario of Primary Schools in Bangladesh

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This study explored the students' reading performances in English at grade four in government primary schools in Bangladesh. Mainly this study follows the quantitative research design as nature. Individual achievement tests have been used to assess the students' performance in achieving comprehension skills in English. The data were collected from students who are studying at government primary schools in class four using achievement test and classroom observation. Following the achievement test, it was found that few students could match all the words and sentences correctly with pictures. Besides, students showed poor performance in answering the Multiple Choice Questions correctly given in the graded text. A positive correlation was found between the matching sentences with pictures and reading comprehension and it has also shown a strong significant relationship between them. The results indicated that teachers should design the teaching-learning activities following teachers' edition and provide ample opportunities for students to practice reading skills in the classroom.

Key Words: Reading skills, Matching, Comprehension Skills, Learning Competencies, Achievement test.

Background of the study

The National Education Policy-2010 sets 30 aims and objectives for education in Bangladesh and in goal no 12 emphasized learning English. Besides, this policy also recommended considering English as a compulsory subject in the curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2012). The students are being taught English as a compulsory subject from grade one to grade five.

The national curriculum in Bangladesh was revised by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) in 2012 by following the outline of National Education Policy- 2010. The NCTB has defined a total number of 29 terminal competencies for primary education. Out of these terminal competencies, number 10 specifically asked learners to achieve basic skills of English as a foreign language and use it in daily life (National Curriculum and Textbook Board [NCTB], 2012). Based on the terminal competencies, a total number of 31 subject-based terminal competencies were also defined categorically to ensure the students' learning English whereas a total number of 7 subject-based terminal competencies also deal with reading skills.

The purpose of teaching English at the primary level is to help students to develop competence in all four language skills in English through meaningful and enjoyable activities (National Curriculum and Textbook Board [NCTB], 2012). Out of four main objectives of learning English, the number 3 objective stated *"to read and understand different types of text appropriate to the learners' ability level"* (National Curriculum and Textbook Board, 2012, p.3).

In our national curriculum, a total number of 13 class-wise attainable competencies were clearly defined for achieving students reading skills at grade four. If the students were able to achieve the targeted 13 class-wise attainable competencies they can read out the grade-level words, phrases, sentences and texts correctly. They can also recognize cardinal numbers and ordinal numbers and punctuation marks correctly. Moreover, the students will be able to understand the paragraphs, stories, personal letters, and other texts materials following answering given questions (National Curriculum and Textbook Board, 2012).

The English for Today (EfT) books of the primary level were developed following the subject-based terminal competencies. Reading aloud and silent reading activities have been included in those textbooks. It is observed that the National Education Policy, primary curriculum, and textbooks emphasize learning English for communicating locally and globally. In this study, reading skill is crucial for a child's success. Most often, the barriers confronted by students with difficulty in reading decline

their desire to read and, without proper support, they never overcome the problem. Learning to read is a sequential process, and the new skill builds on the mastery of previously learned skills. Early on, for example, children learn to break down words into their most basic sounds. Later, they begin to comprehend the meaning of words, sentences, and passages of a text.

The ability to read and comprehend a simple text is one of the important skills a student should have achieved. RTI International (2015) stated

> "without basic literacy, there is little chance that a child will escape the intergenerational cycle of poverty. Yet in many countries, students enrolled in school for as many as six years are unable to read and understand a simple text. Evidence indicates that learning to read a book early and at a sufficient rate (with comprehension) is essential for learning to read well" (p.2).

Finally, reading skills are vital for children's development, and consecutive studies have shown a link between competency in reading and overall attainment. This study tried to identify the students' reading ability in English at grade four in government primary schools in Bangladesh. It is mentioned that this is so far the first attempt to examine the reading ability in English whereas contemporary research is focused on finding the readability of Bangla language.

Rationale of the study

The ability to read acts as a crucial factor in developing confidence and a good self-image among learners. Poor readers often have low opinions of themselves and their abilities. Many times they feel as if the world is against them. They perform poorly in other subjects because they cannot read and understand the material. Often the reader tends to give up.

The experts of RTI International, who have developed the Early Grade Reading Assessment Tools (EGRA) tool kit, cited the importance of assessing reading as basic literacy is the foundation. Children first need to learn to read so that they can read to learn. As children pass through the grade levels, more and more academic content is transmitted to them through text, and their ability to acquire new knowledge and skills depends largely on their ability to read and extract meaning from text.

Reading disability of children hinders them to acquire basic knowledge that they are expected to achieve according to their age level. Sometimes severe reading disability demotivates the students to participate actively in the school activities; most often they drop out of schools. More than 250 million children around the world are not learning foundational reading skills (UNESCO, 2020), 130 millions of whom have spent at least

four years in school (UNICEF, 2015). So, it is a crying need to address this critical problem by connecting stakeholders, individuals, and organizations committed to ensuring that all children can read.

Moreover, in National Education Policy-2010 and National Curriculum-2012, it has been clearly stated that students should achieve reading skills in English to communicate locally and globally. In each grade learning outcomes are set on reading aloud and silent reading skills. In grade 4, students are expected to recognize words, read sentences, and comprehend the texts; whereas basic reading skills are supposed to be achieved in early grades. So, it demands a study to know the present situation of students' readability in English.

It is observed that, when a child's reading disability is identified early, that child is more likely to learn strategies that will raise his or her reading eagerness later. So, it needs to conduct a study to know what extent of the grade 4 students have achieved the expected learning outcomes. What are the teaching-learning strategies being followed in the classroom to enhance students' reading skills? What are the limitations to achieve the desired goal? Besides, based on the findings the study recommended some steps for practitioners and policymakers, which will help the authority to mitigate the reading inability issue effectively.

Research context

The primary education level is compulsory for 6+ children in Bangladesh since 1990 after the signing of EFA declaration. The government is trying to ensure world-class education to shape 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 different bench-mark for developing English language skills of primary students from curriculum to textbooks where reading is treated as an emphasized area in English.

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) since 2006, while the ability of reading English was still not assessed in NSA. English is a compulsory subject at primary level and every exam including PECE assesses the students' two skills (reading and writing) out of four basic skills of English language through a paper-pencil test. Regarding learning English as a foreign language, most of the students have a panic about this language and

generally, they got poor marks in English at all primary level exams. Regarding these aspects, the researchers decided to assess the students' reading skills in English, and this is so far the first attempt in this country.

Objectives of the study

The main objective of the study was to explore the reading ability in English of class four students of government primary schools in Bangladesh. Here, the researchers have tried to discuss students' performance in reading with understanding. To satisfy the query, the researchers explored the answers of -

a) how well students perform in matching words and sentences with the pictures?
b) how well the student can perform in reading comprehension activities?
c) what teaching-learning strategies are being followed in teaching reading?

Methodology

Mainly this study follows the quantitative research design. Here we used an individual achievement test to identify the students' learning level on English reading segment. According to Reynolds, Livingston, & Willson (2011), *"standardized achievement test is used in the identification, diagnosis and classification of students with special learning needs"* (p.324). Following this achievement test, the numeric data were collected from students who are studying at government primary schools in grade four in Bangladesh.

The study covered all the educational divisions considering the geographical locations in Bangladesh. A total number of 28 schools from 10 districts were selected randomly from the national school list prepared by the directorate of primary education. Then, the total number of 280 students were selected randomly from grade four. Besides, a total number of 10 English classrooms were selected purposively to observe the teaching-learning activities regarding teaching reading. Specifically, one classroom was selected from each district.

An achievement test including different types of items was administered to assess the attainable competencies (1.4, 3.1 and 5.1) for class four. These were matching words with pictures, matching sentences with pictures, recognizing the names of weekdays in a calendar, and MCQs for reading comprehension. Besides, a classroom observation checklist was used to perceive the English classroom situation about teaching reading.

Finally, the collected data were analyzed through descriptive statistics and inferential statistics by using SPSS.

Results

The collected data were analyzed to meet the research objectives where the researchers focused on assessing the attainable competency 1.4 (to read and match words and sentences with pictures) through matching words & sentences with a picture. Besides, the attainable competency 3.1 (to recognize and read the names of the days of the weeks and the months) was assessed. In addition, researchers also measured the attainable competency 5.1 (to read silently with understanding simple sentences, paragraphs and other texts) through reading comprehension test. Results and findings of the study were organized thematically as presented below:
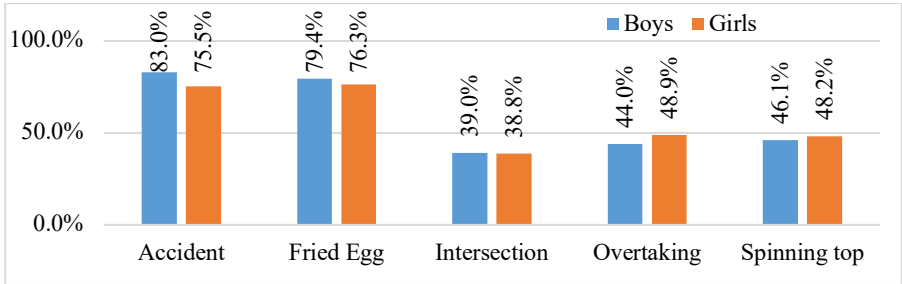
Matching words with pictures

To assess the students' understanding in word meaning (attainable competency-1.4), five different words (accident, fried egg, intersection, overtaking, spinning top) were given according to their grade level and students were asked to match words with the pictures.

Table 1: The overall performance of matching words with the pictures

Number of words	% of Matching Words
Not correct any word	1.8
Correct one word	17.1
Correct two words	26.4
Correct three words	21.8
Correct four words	10.0
Correct five words	22.9

The above table shows that a maximum of 26.4% of students of class four were able to match two words and 22.9 % of students were able to match five words correctly with the respective pictures. Around 22% of students were able to match three words with the pictures, besides 17.1% of students were able to match one word correctly. Whereas, around 2% of students were not able to match any words correctly with the given pictures.

Figure 1: Gender-wise performance of matching words with the pictures

The above figure shows that there is no visible difference found in performances between boys and girls in correcting words with the given pictures. It is observed that students performed better in matching words "*Accident*" and "*Fried Egg*", whereas they least performed in matching the word "*Intersection*".
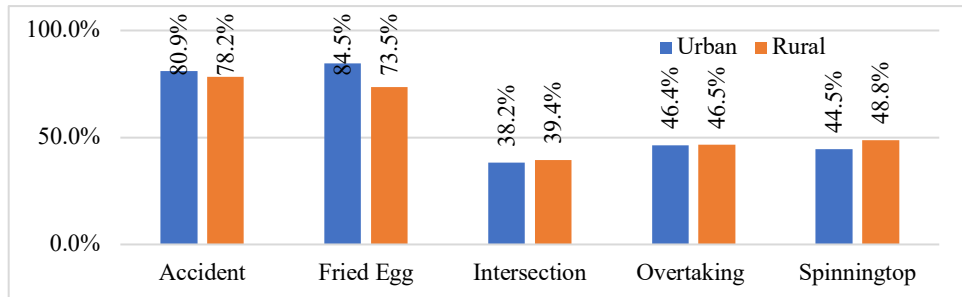

Figure 2: Location-wise performance of matching words with the pictures

The Figure-2 shows the location-wise students' performance of matching works and it is observed that there is no noticeable difference found in performances between urban and rural areas in correcting words with the given pictures. It is also found that students of urban areas performed better (84.5%) in matching word "*Fried Egg*" than the students of rural areas (73.5%).

Matching sentences with pictures

To assess the students' performance in understanding sentence meaning (attainable competency 1.4), five different pictures were used, where three sentences were given for each picture and students were asked to match the sentences with the pictures. The correct five sentences are "*There are vegetables in the picture*", "*The man and women are standing in a line*", "*The doctor is looking after the patient*", "*The people are using zebra crossing to cross the street*", and "*Three animals are under the quilt*".

Table 2: The overall performance of matching sentences with the pictures

Number of sentences	% of Matching sentences
Not correct any	10.2
Correct one	8.7
Correct two	13.5
Correct three	27.3
Correct four	25.5
Correct five	14.9

The above table shows that a maximum of 27.3% of students of class four were able to match three sentences and 25.5% of students were

able to match four sentences correctly with the respective pictures. Around 15% of students were able to match five sentences with the pictures and 13.5% of students were able to match two sentences correctly. Whereas, 10.2% of students were not able to match any sentences correctly with the given pictures.
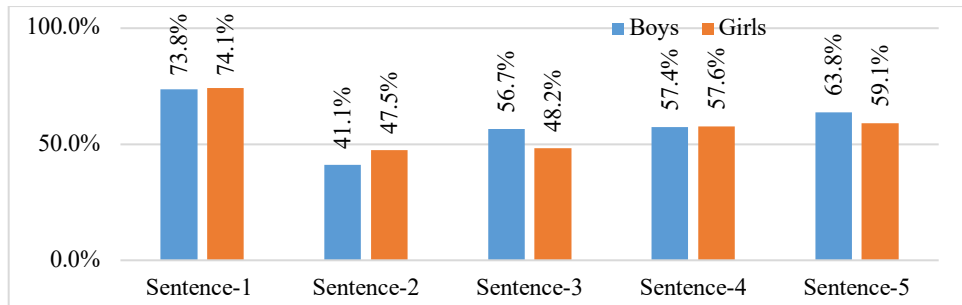

Figure 3: Gender-wise performance of matching sentences with pictures

The above figure shows that there is no observable difference in performances between boys and girls in matching sentences with the given pictures. It is observed that students (73.8% boys and 74.1% girls) performed better in matching sentence-one "*There are vegetables in the picture*" correctly. On the contrary, performance of about half of the students (41.1% boys and 47.5% girls) performance was not satisfactory in matching sentence two "*The man and women are standing in a line*".
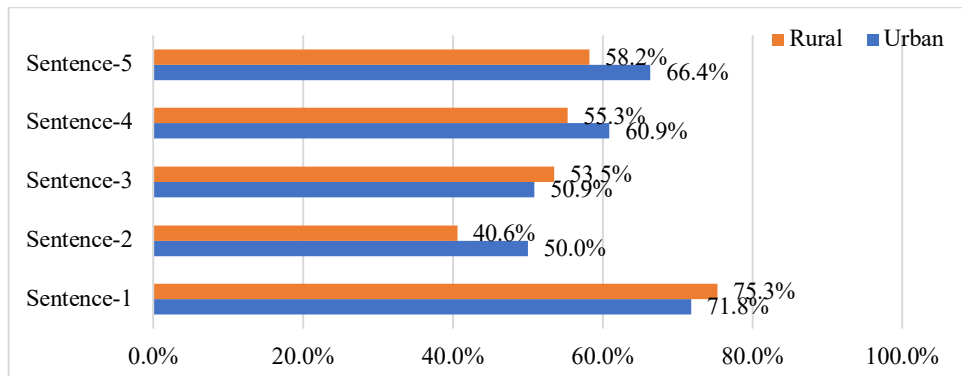

Figure 4: Location wise performance of matching sentences with pictures

This figure presents the location-wise students' performance in matching sentences with the pictures. It is observed that there was a little difference found in students' performance of urban areas. The students of urban performed better in matching sentences (sentence- 2, 4 and 5) than the students of rural areas.

Identifying weekdays from a calendar

To assess the students understanding about identifying weekdays from a calendar (attainable competency 3.1), a picture of a calendar showing one month was given following six questions. Students were asked to write the names of the weekdays in response to those questions.
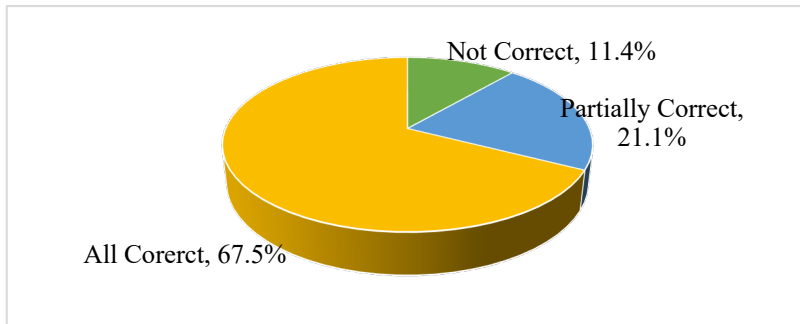

Figure 5: Students performance to recognizing weekdays from Calendar

The above figure shows that the majority (76.5%) students were able to answer all six questions correctly whereas 21.1% of students were able to answer correctly a few of the provided questions. It is found that around 12% of students weren't able to answer any of the questions correctly.

Students' performance in silent Reading

One simple text was used to assess students reading comprehension skills (attainable competency 5.1), which is taken from beyond English for Today (EFT) and comprises 43 words. The text is followed by five multiple-choice questions. The result of the students' performance is like-
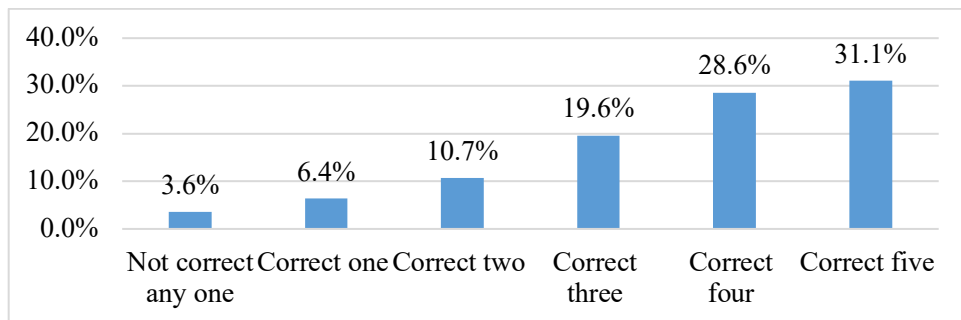

Figure 6: Students' overall performance in reading comprehension

The above figure shows that around 60% of students of class four answered correctly at least four multiple-choice questions given in the reading text. On the contrary, it is found that the rest of the students (40%) were not able to answer at least four MCQs correctly, which means their performance in reading comprehension is not satisfactory.
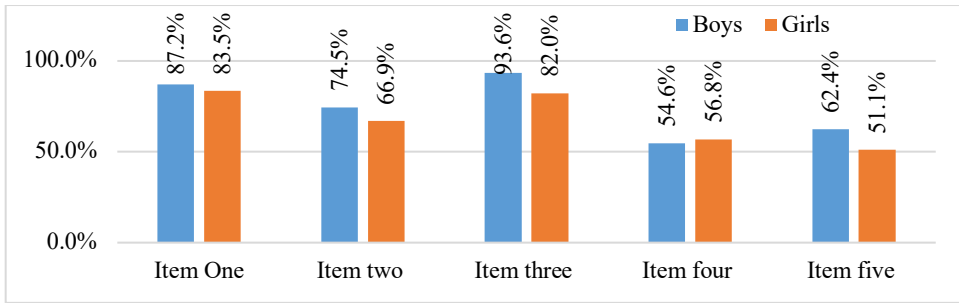
Figure 7: Gender wise performance in reading comprehension

The above figure shows that there is no visible difference in performances between boys and girls in MCQs. The first four items were mainly knowledge-based whereas item five was understanding based. It is observed that the students performed better in "Item one" and "Item three". Around 50% of students were able to answer correctly in "Item four" and "Item five".
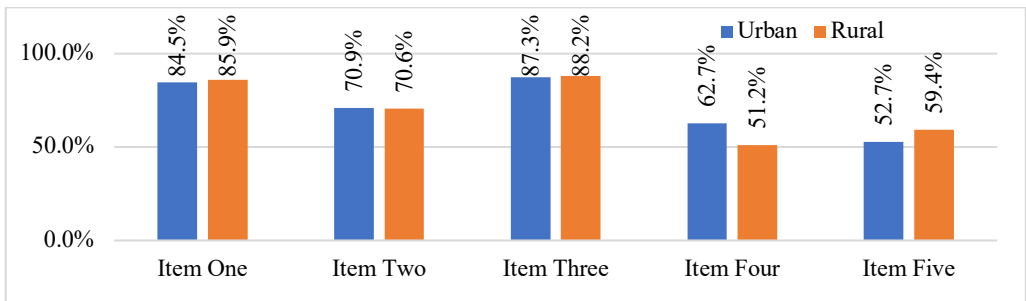

Figure 8: Location-wise performance in reading comprehension

The figure-7 shows that there is no noticeable difference in the performances of students of urban and rural areas. In responding Item-4, the students of urban area performed a bit better than the students of rural area.

Relationship among word-sentence reading and reading comprehension

Table 3: Correlation about students' performance on different items

		Matching words with pictures	Matching sentences with pictures	Reading comprehension
Matching words with pictures	Pearson correlation	1	0.333**	0.266**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	-	.000	.000
Matching sentences with pictures	Pearson correlation	0.333**	1	0.361**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	-	.000

Reading comprehension	Pearson correlation	0.266**	0.361**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	-

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The above table shows a moderate positive correlation (r= 0.333) between matching words with pictures and matching sentences with pictures, and a slight positive correlation (r=0.266) between the matching words with pictures and reading comprehension, which has shown a strong significant (p=0.000) relationship among them. Similarly, there was also a good positive correlation (r= 0.361) between the matching sentences with pictures and reading comprehension and it has also shown a strong significant (p=0.000) relationship between them. When the correlations fall into the range from .20 to .35 and from .35 to .65, the coefficients would be considered as slight relationship and good relationship respectively (Creswell, 2012, p.347).

Classroom scenario of teaching-learning practice

To understand the teaching-learning process in teaching reading, a total of ten classroom activities were observed. In the classroom observation, the following areas were highlighted- teachers' subject knowledge, following teachers' edition, use of teaching aids and students assessment, where data were analyzed following scales (not satisfactory=1, average=2, satisfactory=3).

Table 4: Scenario of classroom observation

	Mean	Slandered Deviation
Teachers' Preparation	1.73	0.79
Subjective Knowledge of teachers	1.45	0.82
Uses of teaching aid	1.27	0.65
Classroom Instruction	1.27	0.79
Motivating students	1.18	0.60
Appling teaching technique	0.90	0.53
Preparing a lesson plan	1.73	0.70
Appling technique to teach words	0.97	0.52
Students participate in activities	1.14	0.72
Assessing students	1.13	0.79

The above table shows the overall scenario of teaching-learning of the observed classes. It is found that the teachers had an average (1.73) preparation for conducting their classes. Besides, they were average in subject knowledge (1.45), in using related teaching aids (1.27), providing classroom instructions (1.27), motivating students (1.18) and preparing

lesson plan (1.73) in their classes. Besides, students' engagement in their classes was also average (1.14) and teachers were able to assess the students' learning average (1.13). Unfortunately, applying the teaching techniques (0.90) and vocabulary teaching techniques (0.97) by following teachers' edition were not satisfactory.

Discussion

Vocabulary, one of five essential components of reading, plays an important role in word recognition and it also acts as a getaway for developing students' comprehension skills (Learning Point Associates, 2004). According to Zahedi and Abdi (2012), *"Vocabulary plays an important role in English language skills. The greater vocabulary the students master, the better they performed their language"* (p.2264). Besides, students are supposed to read and match words with pictures correctly after completing grade three (National Curriculum and Textbook Board [NCTB], 2012). In grade four students are expected to read words, phrases, and sentences without the help of pictures. In this study, matching words with pictures, matching sentences with pictures, and a short text was used to assess the reading comprehension skill of grade four students. Students were asked to match the five different words with the given pictures. Only 22.9% were able to match the words correctly with the pictures and the result is not quite satisfactory.

Matching pictures with the given sentences is considered as a good technique to support English language learners especially the primary level students to develop vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. The scenery is even worse when it is seen that only 14.9% of students could match the five different sentences with the respective pictures. This indicates that most of the students couldn't achieve the targeted competency of grade three. That is they face difficulties to match words and sentences with pictures correctly in grade four.

Reading comprehension is a process of constructing meaning by accumulating a number of the process including word reading, word knowledge, and fluency (Klingner, Vaughn and Boardman, 2007). Comprehension is the ultimate target of reading instructions. Students have the opportunity to practice silent reading skills in grade three. It is obvious that when students have a good foundation in understanding words and sentences (Rhodes, 1922), they can understand any texts according to their age level. For grade four, learning outcome 5.1.1. defines that students will be able to read silently with understanding paragraphs, stories, and other texts (National Curriculum and Textbook Board [NCTB], 2012). To assess this competency, one simple text was used which is taken from beyond EFT

and comprises 43 words. The text is followed by five multiple-choice questions. Only 31.1% of students of class four correctly answered the five MCQs and around 4% of students couldn't choose any correct answer. Students performed poorly in answering item five which focused checking understanding level. Students' performances in answering text followed questions that reveal that they had a problem in reading with understanding. The issues behind this poor performance in reading comprehension are lack of vocabulary knowledge, poor oral language skills and negative attitudes towards reading (Mehmood, Parveen, Hashmi, Shakoor, Hussain and Ali, 2012).

Students who have a wide range of vocabulary and good at oral skills, can perform better in achieving comprehension skills. A student who can read words and sentences easily, s/he can read any graded level texts spontaneously and they do not face any difficulties to understand the meaning of texts (Learning Point Associates, 2004). This study illustrates that a good positive correlation exists between matching sentences with pictures and reading comprehension and it has also shown a strong significant relationship between them. Vedyanto (2016) also found a very good correlation in matching pictures with words which they used in a test to assess students' achievement in vocabulary.

Effective teachers know how to develop students vocabulary, sentence-level understanding and comprehension skills, and they design their teaching-learning activities including different strategies of teaching reading (Oktavia and Fitriana, 2017). This study found that teachers have not followed the teaching-learning strategies given in the teachers' edition and they also did not apply strategies of teaching vocabulary while teaching new words. As a result, students' performance was not satisfactory level in achieving reading competencies.

Conclusion

This study answered the research question administrating achievement test using different test items. In our national primary curriculum, it is expected that students are able to read words, sentences and different types of graded level texts with understanding. In this study, it was found that majority of the students were not able to perform the expected level of competency in recognizing words, reading sentences and comprehending texts. Following the inferential statistics, it could be summed up that there was a good positive correlation among the matching words, sentences with pictures and reading comprehension.

The ultimate target of learning to read is to develop students' reading comprehension skills. A classroom teacher should prepare himself

and design the classroom activities following the teachers' edition to develop the students' reading skills. Students can develop their vocabulary easily if the teacher follows the stages of vocabulary in teaching new words. When students are good at comprehension skills, they can read independently with pleasure and it opens their avenue to gather new knowledge that is written in English.

This study is expected to make a contribution to the teachers, policymakers and researchers, especially in understanding the students' performance in achieving reading competencies, which will also help them to adopt appropriate strategies to enhance the learners' reading skills.

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