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The Reasons for the Poor Reading Skills of the Students on Entry to the Tertiary Level of Education in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to find out the reasons for the poor reading skills of students on entry to the tertiary level of education in Bangladesh. By the time they enter the undergraduate studies, they are supposed to have acquired the skills they need, because they have already learnt the language for at least 6 years, starting from class 6 to class 12. Unfortunately, they cannot acquire the skills as required. And as the books and the medium of instruction are all in English in undergraduate classes, students face quite a challenge. This study finds that when they have come to tertiary level of education, they, with few exceptions, have done very little reading of anything except comprehension passages in their English course books. S/he may never have read a whole book in their life. So they cannot acquire the required reading skills. In addition, up to class 12 the students are only involved in intensive reading practices, either in bottom up or top down approach or a combination of both. Students are never encouraged for extensive reading. Whereas, extensive reading can strengthen what they learn in intensive reading. Moreover, the linguistic culture we are in says that mere encouragement for extensive reading is not enough. It should be directly guided by the teachers. So, a syllabus that combines intensive reading and extensive reading may solve the problem.

Keywords: *Proof reading Skills, Student, Education, Bangladesh.*

INTRODUCTION

The problem

The students on entry to the tertiary level of education in Bangladesh are said to have unacceptably low level of proficiency in English. Whereas, the books and the medium of instruction at tertiary level of education are all in English. So, when they are exposed to the texts in undergraduate classes, they face quite a challenge. But by the time they enter the undergraduate studies, they are supposed to have acquired the skills they need, because they have already learnt the language for at least 6 years, starting from class 6 to class 12. Unfortunately, they cannot acquire the skills as required. It seems to be a

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mystery. So, I felt it necessary to look into the problem to find out the reasons for the poor reading skills of students on entry to the tertiary level of education in Bangladesh.

THE AIMS AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

This study focused on only the reading skills because “further education depends on quantity and quality of reading. All the important study skills require quick, efficient and imaginative reading.” (Bright & McGregor, 1970, p. 52). As the medium of instruction is English and the books they study are all written in English, the students at this level of education should be skilled readers. But since they don’t have the reading skills as required, most of them mainly depend on the memorization of prepared notes to set questions. As a result, they cannot study with profit. Hence, it is a crying need for us to find out the reasons and to work for a solution to the problem.

Research questions

To find out the reasons behind poor reading skills of the students on entry to tertiary level of education I identified the following questions to investigate:

1. Which reading skills do the students lack?
2. What are the reasons behind the lacking?
3. What solutions do the reasons indicate?

Research hypotheses

We can formulate the questions as the following research hypotheses. (1) While reading English texts most of the students understand only the explicitly stated information. But they find it hard to deduce the meaning and use of unfamiliar lexical items. In addition, they cannot understand the lexical and syntactic cohesion devices. As a result, it becomes challenging for them to understand the conceptual meaning of a text. (2) Students from class 6 to class 12 study only the comprehension passages, which, in most cases, are not interesting. Students read the passages only to pass the examinations. When they have come to tertiary level of education, with few exceptions, they have done very little reading of anything except comprehension passages in their English course books. S/he may never have read a whole book in their life. So they cannot acquire the required reading skills. (3) Up to class 12 the students are only involved in intensive reading practices, either in bottom up or top down approach or a combination of both. Students are never encouraged in extensive reading. Whereas, extensive reading can strengthen what they learn in intensive reading. Moreover, the linguistic culture we are in says that mere encouragement to extensive reading is not enough. It should be directly guided by the teachers. So, a syllabus that combines intensive reading and extensive reading may solve the problem.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading skills and reading processes: Extensive amounts of research, opinions and suggestions exist regarding the teaching of the reading skills. Munby (1978) has given a list of the skills involved in reading. On the basis of that list we can say that a good reader should have these skills: understanding explicitly stated information; deducing the meaning and use of unfamiliar lexical items; understanding the lexical and syntactic cohesion devices; understanding the conceptual meaning of a text; interpreting text by going outside it; extracting salient points to summarize (the text, an idea etc.); skimming; scanning to locate specifically required information (pp. 123-131). Moreover, an expert reader can ‘respond to more than the plain sense of the words. He feels emotional implications, responds to figurative language and understands humour and irony.’ (Bright & McGregor, 1970, p. 57)

In addition to the skills mentioned above, ‘good readers are fast readers. Helping students increase their reading rate is also of utmost importance’ (Debat, 2006, p.14). There is no fixed rate of reading speed. For Nattal (1996), ESL learners may read at 120 – 150 words per minute (wpm) before training. University students where English is used as a second language may read at about 200 wpm. But when the texts were difficult and had to be understood thoroughly they have been found to study at rates as slow as 60 wpm. And a L1 speaker of English, of about average education and intelligence, reads about 300 wpm. (p. 56). However, balancing speed and comprehension is necessary. ‘The expectation is that eventually both speed and comprehension will increase. In the reading programme, as a whole, comprehension remains the overriding consideration.’ (Nattal, 58)

Bright & McGregor (1970) argue, “where there is little reading, there will be little language learning... Only by reading can the pupil acquire the speed and skills he will need for practical purposes” (52). They further say that clarity, precision, depth, organization - all the things involved in a full response - are unattainable without copious reading. ... It is the constant activating of the mind in response that leads to skill. It is in the use of the language that learning takes place. There is no substitute in language learning for constant use. If the pupil cannot live in an English-speaking environment all his working hours, he must spend as many hours as he can immersed in books. Books provide most pupils with the situations in which learning takes place. He must substitute imaginary for actual experience. The teacher’s first duty is to ensure that vast quantities of reading are done. If he does this, and no more, all pupils will be constantly presented with learning situations and some will develop for themselves depth and delicacy of understanding. If he does not ensure that enough reading is done, no amount of toiling over ‘comprehension’ passages will produce competent readers.... It is easy for us who are teachers to overrate the value of what takes place in class and to underrate what happens when the pupil is alone with a book.

Quantity of reading also helps improve vocabulary. We find two categories of known words in a L1 vocabulary: an active vocabulary of words we know well enough to use ourselves, and a receptive vocabulary of words we recognize and can respond to, but cannot confidently use. This is the same with a foreign language.

Immediate active use of words encountered when reading is seldom necessary. If the word is important enough, students will meet it again and again (this is where the extensive reading programme is so important) until they are confident enough to use it themselves. ... Continued exposure to the language is far the best way to transform receptive words into active ones. (Nattal, pp. 63-64) ... Usually this involves assimilating the meaning gradually, after frequent encounters. In the classroom, students simply do not get enough exposure for this natural assimilation to be possible. Therefore solutions outside the classroom must be found. *An extensive reading programme is the single most effective way of improving vocabulary.* (Nattal, p. 62)

‘Good things happen to students who read a great deal in the foreign language. Research studies show they become better and more confident readers, they write better, their listening and speaking abilities improve, and their vocabularies get richer. In addition, they develop positive attitudes toward and increased motivation to study the new language.’ (Bamford & Day, 2004, p.1). However, extensive reading schemes usually emphasize individual and largely unguided activity. With ‘its overwhelming concern to develop reading fluency and aesthetic appreciation, the typical extensive reading scheme fails to pay sufficient attention to the development of learners’ target language systems’ (Green, 2005, 309). ‘For this reasons, it is vital to introduce extensive reading within the purposeful and interactive framework of the task-based language curriculum’ (Green, 311).

English for Today: For Classes 11-12: A review

The textbook the students on entry to tertiary level of education read at Classes 11 & 12 features only the intensive reading. The book *English for Today: For Classes 11-12* prescribed by National Curriculum & Textbook Board is divided into 23 units containing 131 lessons. Each unit is based on a theme. The lessons contain ‘reading texts and a range of tasks and activities designed to enable students to practise the different skills, sometimes individually and sometimes in pairs or groups’ (Rahman, 2001, i). The book has taken into account the continuous interaction between bottom-up and top-down processing in the construction of the meaning of a text. This is all right because ‘although good readers decode automatically with little cognitive effort, second language learners need help in decoding, since for them language is a key problem that cannot be solved by guessing.’ (Debat, 2006, p. 14) Efficient and effective reading entails both processes interacting simultaneously (Carrel 1998, pp. 239-59).

However, there are no materials or instructions for extensive reading in this textbook titled *English for Today: For Classes 11-12*. Few, if any, language professionals dispute the value of extensive reading for improving students' reading abilities, motivation to read, self-concept as readers, vocabulary and other skills (e.g., Bright & McGregor, 1970; Day & Bamford, 1998; Nattal, 1996). According to Day and Bamford (1998), the beauty of extensive reading is that it leads to "reading gain without reading pain" (p. 121).

EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

Subjects

To examine what the students really learn from the reading materials provided by *English for Today: For Classes 11-12*, I did an experiment on 81 students in four sections on their entry to tertiary level of education at Northern University Bangladesh. I had HSC examination test scores of the students. Their results ranging from CGPA 2.5 to 5. In their HSC examination three of them got A+, three A, twenty four A-, six B+, thirty three B, and twelve of them obtained C in English. The results in English say that the subjects include students of different levels of proficiency in English. In addition, 25% of the students are from schools and colleges at thana level, 35% from those of district level and 40% from those of Dhaka city. Hence the results from this experiment may reflect the general phenomenon of the students on entry to tertiary level of education in Bangladesh.

RESEARCH METHOD

I employed three principal data collection methods for doing empirical research. They were: (1) a test to diagnose the reading skills of the students on entry to tertiary level of education (Appendix A), (2) a questionnaire completed by students (Appendix B), and (3) an analysis of teaching materials for classes 11 – 12 (Here, it is the textbook *English for Today: For Classes 11-12*), which is done in section 3.

Type of Data and Analysis

The study resulted in two types of data – diagnostic test results and the information from the questionnaire. Here I resort to interpretive data analysis.

Diagnostic Test Results Analysis to know the condition of the subjects' reading skills: 15 questions focusing different types of reading skills were set to assess the reading skills of the students. Question 1 was to examine the understanding of the explicitly stated information; questions 3 & 4 to make clear the suggestion of feeling conveyed by lexical items; question 11 to make clear the suggestions of feeling conveyed by grammar or syntax; Questions 2, 5, 12, 13 & 14 to know the understanding of the conceptual meaning of the text, the relationship of words and the situation as a whole. Some of the questions were set to assess the understanding of emotional implication:

questions 6, 8, 9 & 10 to make clear what is suggested by figurative language or comparisons; finally questions 7 & 15 were to involve summarizing and the correct response to wholes.

The diagnostic test results (Table 1) show that 70.37% of the students have the skill in understanding explicitly stated information. The remaining 30% of them cannot even understand what is explicitly stated in a text. About 50% (the average of 66.6% and 44.4%) of the students can trace the suggestion of feeling conveyed by lexical items.

TABLE 1: PERFORMANCE IN READING TEST

Questions	Percentage of the students who answered correctly
1 & 6	70.37%
3 & 13	66.6%
14	55.5 %
8	51.85%
4	44.4%
2 & 11	33.3%
7 & 10	18.5%
12	14.8%
5, 9 & 15	11.1%

And about 33.3% can trace the suggestion conveyed by grammar or syntax. Only about 36.26 % (the average of 33.3, 11.1, 14.8, 66.6 and 55.5) of the students can understand the conceptual meaning of the text, the relationship of words and the situation as a whole.

Where the suggestion of figurative language or comparisons is concerned, only about 37.9% (the average of 70.37, 51.85, 11.1 and 18.5) of the students can understand the text. And only about 14.8 % (the average of 18.5 and 11.1%) of the students are capable of summarizing, and responding to wholes correctly. So, accepting the skill to understand what is explicitly stated they are lacking in almost all other skills.

A comparative analysis of the diagnostic test results and HSC examination results & students reading habit: 'It is important to bear in mind that students learn to read by reading; although this may seem obvious, they need to read a great deal.' (Debat, 2006, p. 14) But our students read very little except their course books. The data collected with the questionnaire give us the information that most of the students didn't read their textbooks completely (Table 2, Column E). None of the students found the reading passages of their textbook interesting. This may be a cause of their reluctance to read the passages. Or this reluctance may be because of the failure of the teachers in guiding and monitoring the students' pre-reading and during reading activities. And if it is so, the

liability goes to the NCTB, because no guide for teachers was provided to facilitate the teaching of this book.

With the questionnaire, I collected data about the subjects' HSC results and information about their reading habit. Then I placed them against the test results in Table 2. And a comparative study of these data and the results say that the subjects' results in the HSC examinations don't reflect on their diagnostic test performance. Instead, sometimes we see that with poor results (columns C & D) in the HSC the students performed better in the diagnostic test (column A). The amount of reading of textbook passages (Column E) also does not reflect on the diagnostic test performance (Column A). The reasons, as they stated in the questionnaire, may be that they read those passages just to pass the examination or sometimes were compelled by the teachers to read them. They did never

TABLE 2: DIADNOSTIC TEST RESULTS, HSC EXAM RESULTS, & READING HABIT

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
SL	Diagnostic test results (Out of 15) [obtained marks & percentage]	Percentage of students who answered correctly	HSC Results (GPA)	Grade in Eng., HSC	Percentage of textbook passages read by the students	Textbook passages enjoyed or not	Other reading
1	2 = 13%	11.1%	3.00 – 4.58	C – A+	50%	Not enjoyed	0*
2	3 = 20%	3.7%	3.30	B	50%	Not enjoyed	1*
3	4 = 27%	7.4%	2.70 – 4.20	B – A-	50 - 100%	Not enjoyed	2*
4	5 = 33%	22.2%	2.50 – 4.50	B – A-	40 - 75%	Not enjoyed	3*
5	6 = 40%	25.9%	3.00 – 4.10	C – A	40 - 75%	Not enjoyed	4*
6	8 = 53%	18.5%	3.60 – 4.60	C – A-	50 - 75%	Not enjoyed	6*
7	9 = 60%	7.4%	3.30 – 4.00	B – B+	40 - 75%	Not enjoyed	6*
8	10= 67%	3.7%	3.20	C	50%	Not enjoyed	6*

*0= not any type of reading

*1 = read a few Bangla stories

*2 = read Bangla novels & read English newspapers sometimes

*3 = read Bangla novels & read English newspapers sometimes

*4 = read Bangla novels & English stories & English newspapers sometimes

*6 = read Bangla novels & English stories & English newspapers regularly enjoy reading the passages (Column F). Whereas, students' habit of reading books besides or other than their textbooks (Column G) influence the reading performance (Column A). Even their habit of reading books in Bangla helped them perform better in the test. Consequently, we can say that the more one read something regularly the better his/her performance was in the diagnostic test.

CONCLUSION

This discussion concludes that students on entry to tertiary level of education are very poor in reading skills in English. About 30% of them cannot even understand the explicitly stated information in a text. We can mention their little reading habit as a reason behind this situation. Whereas, students learn to read only by reading. So, there is no alternative to attractive and interesting reading materials for encouraging students to read. Detached passages, as we find in *English for Today: For Classes 11-12*, most of the times cannot appeal to the mind of the readers. So, extensive reading – reading individually and silently- should be introduced in the syllabus. As we possess an examination-oriented school culture where students only read to cut good figures in the examination, here an unassessed and isolated extensive reading scheme, besides intensive reading scheme, may not be successful, as Green (2005) observes that ‘in examination-oriented school cultures particularly – of which Hong Kong is a leading example - the unassessed and isolated nature of extensive reading schemes is almost certain to guarantee that they are marginalized beyond redemption’ (p.308). So, extensive reading should be combined with the now-going-on task-based intensive reading program. ‘Task-based approaches permit reading matter to be debated and used, and reading extensively provides opportunities for students to encounter gaps in their understanding of target language usage as they take advantage of the interaction and negotiation promoted in task-based approaches’ (Green, 2005, 309).

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