

Assessing Curriculum Competencies: Review of Bangla Test Questions in Primary Education Terminal Examination

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Abstract

For elementary level learners, it is crucial to master basic linguistic competencies in mother tongue (L1), which in turn smoothen the overall learning process. Assessment of linguistic competencies requires careful consideration of the curricular aim for L1. In Bangladesh, the elementary stage of education ends with a public examination called Primary School Certificate (PSC) examination. The examination format includes only written testing which should reflect, as much as possible, the competencies prescribed by the curriculum for primary level. This paper reviews the questions set for Bangla (Bangla is the L1 for the large majority of students) in years 2009, 2010 and 2011. The main objective of this review was to explore the nature of the Bangla test items and see how or to what extent they are aligned with competencies prescribed in the national curriculum for the primary level. The question paper review was conducted keeping Bangla Terminal Competencies, Bangla Textbook for grade 5 and the cognitive domain of learning in consideration.

I. Introduction

Since 2009, students of primary level have been receiving a credential for completing primary education and becoming eligible for the next level of education (lower secondary) through a public examination given to the students at the end of grade five, called Primary School Certificate examination (PSC). Public examination is not uncommon in Bangladesh, but it has been introduced now for the first time as early as in grade five, a practice not followed internationally. This examination is administered nationwide at a time through a common set of question papers followed by publication of result applying a grading system. Students obtaining good grades are rewarded with scholarship, instead of the previous practice of a selected few sitting for a separately arranged scholarship examination. In preparing question papers for externally conducted public examination, academic merit level of students are sought to be judged (Linn & Gronlund, 2000). But this is generally done at the secondary level, rather than at the primary level, which is regarded as too early for

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subjecting students to the pressure of a competitive public examination and labeling young students as academically successful or failures.

It is expected that students at the primary level would achieve the competencies listed in the primary curricula so that they build a strong foundation for the next levels of education. A critical concern, therefore, would be whether and how a public examination (PSC) at this level is helpful in this respect. A competency based primary education curriculum was introduced two decades ago. Ensuring achievement of the competencies requires that the assessment system is consistent with the curricular aims (Kabir & Monzoor, 2008). A pertinent question is to what extent the assessment tests in the cycle completion examination (PSC) correspond with the curricular aims. With this question in mind, we have undertaken the review of the Bangla test question papers of last three years since PSC has been introduced. We have selected Bangla test questions so that we can consider how valid and reliable these tests are in measuring Bangla (L1) language competencies of students. This paper will review the Bangla test questions of 2009, 2010 and 2011 keeping the Bangla terminal competencies prescribed by the primary curriculum in consideration. It will also explore the related issues of the test structure, textbook reliance of the tests and how the cognitive domains are handled.

II. Background and Rationale

Primary School Certificate (PSC) examination marks the completion of a five year cycle of first level of formal education and students move on to the next level of education if they obtain the minimum marks for passing. National Academy for Primary Education (NAPE) designs the question papers for PSC examination. Before this national public examination was introduced in 2009, for a short period since 2006, district-wise completion examination was administered with district level committees setting the question papers following model questions provided by NAPE (Akbar, Dhar & Mullick, 2008). Until 2005, primary education cycle ended with a school based examination and certification.

In Bangladesh, the curriculum for the primary level is considered to be competency based and the aim is to ensure that students achieve a minimum set of competencies (CAMPE, 2000).

There are multiple interpretations of competency in educational literature. From a functionalist point of view, competency is synonymous to skill (Evers, Rush, & Berdrow, 1998). The curriculum for primary level introduced by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) has identified a set of general competencies and formulated subject-wise terminal competency-based Essential Learning Continuum (ELC) for a five-year cycle. The curriculum for the primary level describes competency (NCTB, 2002-2003, p-7) as 'the gained knowledge, ability and attitude which could be applied in real life at the right time' (translated from the original Bangla). However, the assessment methods and practices to measure competencies achieved by students remain problematic. The

assessment tests/examinations appear merely to assess content knowledge, rather than competency, and teaching in the classroom is shaped by the demands of the examinations. (Banu, 2009).

The main tool for assessment at the primary level has been written test which is summative in nature, though ideally formative assessment should be the dominant mode. It is generally accepted that large-scale standardized testing does not allow effective assessment of all types of competencies (Mathews, 1985). If tests/examinations are the main assessment tools, they should be designed carefully so that they come as close as possible to examining the intended curriculum (Hall & Burke, 2004). The design of the test items should take into account how the minimum target competencies can be measured.

PSC examination is administered through written testing of six subjects areas – i. Bangla, ii. English, iii. Mathematics, iv. Science, v. Social Science and vi. Religious Studies from the primary curriculum. Having written tests as the sole measurement instrument, assessment of oral communication skills, cognition, and values and attitudes is neglected. Recognizing this limitation, we attempted to analyse written question papers to understand how they correspond to the competencies learners are expected to acquire at the primary level. We have narrowed down the focus of the review to assessment of the Bangla language curriculum.

The Bangla test questions of 2009, 2010 and 2011 were selected for review. It is generally agreed that teaching of the first language (L1) at the elementary stage is crucial and carries or should carry a lot of curricular weight. Moreover, there is an interdependent relationship between language and the overall learning process (Whitehead, 2002). L1 education is of huge importance not only because of its own value, but it is also the means of learning other skills and developing cognitive abilities (Evans & Carr, 1985). L1 is usually the medium of instruction for other subjects. Since the language curriculum emphasized measurable competencies, the tests should be geared to measuring those competencies. Another aspect is the cognitive dimensions of the competencies which must not be ignored. So we focused on the assessment tool for Bangla (L1) language in the national examination to explore the nature of the Bangla test items - how they relate to curriculum-prescribed competencies and textbook contents and their potential for assessing cognitive abilities of students.

Review of Test Questions

The objective of the question paper review was to understand the characteristics and determine the validity of the Bangla test items used as assessment tools in the Primary School Certificate (PSC) examination in different years (2009, 2010 and 2011). The following concerns were kept in view in preparing the guidelines for the review.

1. To what extent could the Bangla terminal competencies be measured through the test items?
2. How are the textbook contents reflected in the test items?
3. What type of cognitive abilities could be measured by the test items?

III. Review Methodology

Bangla question papers used in PSC from 2009 to 2011 were collected. These three sets of question papers were analysed keeping in view the 16 Terminal Competencies for Bangla, grade 5, the content of the grade 5 Bangla textbook (Amar Bangla Boi) and the cognitive domains suggested by Bloom. As terminal competencies reflected the curricular goals for the primary level, we thought these ought to determine the main criteria for reviewing the question papers of cycle completion examination (PSC). We analysed the terminal competencies as ground work for this review. Furthermore, we looked into the Bangla textbook to gauge the relationship between the test items and the textbook contents. Lastly, we considered cognitive domains of Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objective to explore the cognitive dimensions of the test items. We followed Bloom's original order of cognitive domains, viz., i. Knowledge, ii. Comprehension, iii. Application, iv. Analysis, v. Synthesis and vi. Evaluation (Blooms, 1956).

Skills Based Terminal Competencies

For the curricular area of Bangla language, there are 16 terminal competencies learners are expected to achieve within five years of primary schooling (NCTB, 2002-2003). These terminal competencies are formulated on the basis of four language skills- Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing. The table below shows all the terminal competencies.

Table1. Skill Based Terminal Competencies

Skill Area	Terminal Competency
1. Listening	1.1 To acquire knowledge about the mode of Bangla language construction, organisation of sentences (syntax) and its rules and applications. 1.2 To be able to understand the main idea of rhymes, poems, stories, conversations, speeches, descriptions etc. in Bangla by listening to them attentively. 1.3 To be able to understand by listening to the numerical words (countable, ordinal and date).
2. Speaking	2.1 To be able to use the mode of Bangla language construction, organisation of sentences and its rules and applications. 2.2 To be able to recite Bangla rhymes, poems and tell stories ,and engage in conversations, speeches, descriptions etc. with understanding. 2.3 To be able to express and exchange own thoughts and feelings to the class –mates and others and speak in standard colloquial Bangla correctly. 2.4 To be able to say the numerical words (countable, ordinal and date).

Skill Area	Terminal Competency
3. Reading	3.1 To be able to apply the mode of construction of Bangla language, organisation of sentences and its rules and applications. 3.2 To be able to understand the main idea of Bangla rhymes, poems, stories, conversations, speeches, descriptions etc. by reading attentively. 3.3 To be able to read Bangla printed and hand-written materials with correct pronunciation, and continue acquiring knowledge about Bangla language. 3.4 To be able to read the numerical words (countable, ordinal and date).
4. Writing	4.1 To be able to apply in writing the mode of Bangla language construction, organisation of sentences and its rules and applications. 4.2 To be able to understand and write the main theme of the Bangla rhymes, poems, stories, conversations, speeches, descriptions etc. 4.3 To be able to write the numerical words (countable, ordinal and date). 4.4 To be able to express in writing about observations, experience and attitudes in correct and clear Bangla language. 4.5 To be able to write ordinary letters, applications and fill in different forms.

Source: National Curriculum for Primary Level, 2002-2003

IV. Structure of Bangla Question Papers in PSC

On the whole, a common structure has been followed in designing the Bangla language questions for the three years - 2009, 2010 and 2011. A total of 100 marks are distributed among 15 questions. There are similarities in the way of ordering the items, options offered, and marks distribution. Only a few variations were found in marks distribution and number of optional items/alternatives provided for some questions. We present the structure of the three years' tests question here:

Box1: Question Structure of PSC

- Q1. Writing from memory the first 8 lines of one of the two poems mentioning the name of poem and the poet. (Marks: -1+1+8)
- Q2. Explaining with reference to the context one of two given quotations from textbook poem/prose content. (Marks :-5)
- Q3. Answering three questions out of five from Bangla Textbook contents. (Marks :-12)
- Q4. Writing the meanings of five words out of given six. (Marks :-5)
- Q5. Making sentences with five words out of given six. (Marks :-5)
- Q6. Putting punctuation marks where necessary in a small passage. (Marks :-5)
- Q7. Filling in blanks in sentences with given alternatives. (Marks :-5)
- Q8. Making questions from a given paragraph. (Marks :-5)
- Q9. Making words using five out of seven given conjunct letters. (Marks :-5)

- Q10. Writing synonyms/antonym of five words out of given six. (Marks :-5)
 Q11. Finding a single word expression (*ek kothai prokash*) for 5 out of 6. (Marks :-5)
 Q12. Changing the form of five verb words out of six. (Marks :-5)
 Q13. Briefly answering of four questions out of six from Bangla textbook contents. (Marks :-8)
 Q14. Writing the gist of one poem out of two from Bangla textbook. (Marks :-8)
 Q15. Writing a short essay on a topic out of given five. (Marks :-12)

Note: In 2011, Q no. 7 had given no alternative but in 2010 and 2009, Q no 7 asked for 5 answers out of 6 and 7 options respectively. In 2011, Q no. 8 asked for making questions, in 2010 there was an alternative of antonyms for 5 words from given 6. In 2009, Q no. 8 asked only for antonyms for 5 words from given 8. Q no.10, 2011 asked for antonyms for 5 given words out of 6 while in 2010 and 2009, Q no. 10 asked for 2 synonyms for any five words out of six. Q no 13, in 2011 asked for 4 answers out of 6 options and marks on offer was 8 whereas in 2010, Q no 13 asked for 5 answers out of 6 with 5 marks on offer and in 2009, 5 marks was assigned for 5 answers out of 8 options for Q no.13.

V. Assessment of Terminal Competencies for Listening and Speaking Skills

The assessment format of PSC examination has no oral/viva-voce test; so technically there is no scope left for measuring 7 terminal competencies (see Table 1) for listening and speaking skill attained by the examinees. As a matter of fact those two skill based competencies have always been ignored in assessment at the primary level. Those competencies in native language are essential in many ways, and more so at the primary level of education.

Listening and speaking are two imperatives for basic communication and some terminal competencies i.e. 1.2, 2.2 and 2.3 (see Table 1) The aim is that students are able to display their listening and speaking skill in different situations. Though these two skills in native language develop and flourish during early years in informal social settings, they should be nurtured systematically within the school context and the level of mastery regularly assessed. If these two skills are not tested, they may not get the level of attention they deserve during classroom activities. Terminal competency 2.3 aims that students would be able to speak correctly in standard Bangla. Evidently, a large scale written test has inherent limitations in measuring listening and speaking skills.

VI. Assessment of Terminal Competencies for Reading Skills

Reading is not just a particular skill; it is part of literacy which is a prerequisite for the literacy and learning skills necessary for other subjects. In PSC examination, there is no option for testing students' Bangla reading competencies. The printed question paper for written test allows measurement of reading competencies albeit in an indirect way. Examinees have to engage in careful reading to make sense for themselves of the printed questions before putting writing the answers. The written test thus in a limited way measures reading competencies and can give an idea of the level of attainment. But two aspects of reading - clarity and correctness in pronunciation (terminal competencies no 3.3) - cannot be tested

without specific testing for this purpose. There is also concern with competency 3.2 which emphasizes that the students learn to understand different aspects of texts by reading. The skill of reading for understanding/comprehension requires cognitive abilities and different reading strategies. Students should be equipped with the strategies and provided with ample opportunities to read different kinds of texts and follow the strategies to comprehend different aspects of the texts (Fyfe & Mitchell, 1985).

VII. Assessment of Terminal Competencies for Writing Skill

In this section we will look at how the test items of Bangla question papers of 2009, 2010 and 2011 addressed the writing skill related to 5 terminal competencies (see Table 1). We will discuss these 5 competencies, their constituent aspects and implications. We will look at the test questions and all sub-items, the structure and intended assessment purposes and try to determine how these are linked with the terminal competencies.

Terminal Competency 4.1 expects that learners would produce correctly written language (Bangla) following grammar, i.e., syntactic rules, application protocols, etc. Some of the question items in PSC addressed this competency in a strict manner, asking for different kinds of sentence formation following certain conditions. Question no.5, for instance, asks to make a sentence with given words. Q no. 6 asks to insert required punctuation marks within a string of sentences for the purpose of accuracy. Q no 7 asks students to complete a set of sentences by filling blanks with given alternatives. The sentences are about some facts or information taken from textbook contents. And Q no. 8 asks to transform a set of assertive sentences into interrogative sentences. It should be noted that the given assertive sentences are mostly informative of certain contextual facts; so those could transformed into only who or what questions. Some Bangla question items in PSC are mainly intended to convey written information and knowledge of certain things from textbook contents. It is implicit that written outputs must be grammatically correct. For measuring broad language and communication skills which require combining competencies in sub-skills, a number of questions were used. Q no.2 about explaining an excerpt from a poem, Q no. 3 for answering factual questions, Q no. 13 answering comprehension questions in brief, Q no 14 on writing on thematic understanding of a poem and Q no 15 about writing essay on a given topic address the broadly defined terminal competency 4.1. Some other questions focus on the lexical aspects of language as this aspect (important for organization of sentence) is implicit in this competency. Q no 4 asks for meanings of given words, Q no 9 asks to form words with conjunct letters, Q no 11 asks for single word expression of an idea (*ek kothae prokash*), Q no. 12 is about changing verb words from classical (*sadhu*) form to modern (*chalito*) form, and Q no. 10 asks for antonym or synonym of given words. Answering these questions basically require calling upon previous knowledge, but no application skill. It was found that 8 questions out of 15 are structured in a way that the students need to provide short or one word answers.

Terminal competency 4.2 is mainly about comprehension/understanding of different type of texts, i.e., story, poem, rhyme, dialogue, speech and narrative. This competency intends that learners would be equipped with the strategy to draw thematic understanding of different types of texts and the means to communicate understanding through written output. The accuracy aspect of previous competency (4.1) is latently present in this. Q no. 2 in asks to explain an excerpt from a poem from grade 5 Bangla textbook and this explanation involves comprehending. Q no. 14 addresses the competency in a strict sense as it asks for thematic understanding of a mentioned poem from the textbook. And a few items under Q no. 3 (answering questions) require ability to comprehend and analyse certain things from textbook contents. Now what is notable here is that Q no. 2, 3 and 14 are directly linked with textbook contents. So, arguably, it is possible to memorize a text and note down some explanation, without an adequate understanding of the theme. These 3 questions may at best provide an indirect and partial indication of comprehension and understanding of a text.

Terminal competency 4.3 is about the ability to write words that signify number, ordinal number, and date. No question item in the tests over the three years specifically assesses this competency.

Terminal Competency 4.4 expects that students will be able to share observation, experience, attitudes and thoughts in correct written language. If we take observation, experience and attitude in true sense these are quite subjective from the point of view of each learner and no question in the last three years actually ask for demonstrating this competency. Some essay topics such as Our Country, A Historical Place, Television (2011), Trees as Friend of Man, Animal World of Bangladesh (2010), Natural Beauty of Bangladesh, Birds of Bangladesh, My Favorite Teacher and My Favorite Book (2009) require students to write from personal experiences and observations. It cannot be determined with any degree of certainty whether students actually express their own observations and experiences, or they provide a memorized answer following a set pattern. It is understood that tutoring and coaching, within and outside school, of examination candidates emphasize answers according to a set pattern rather than spontaneity in expression. It is expected that learners achieve the linguistic capacity to express their thoughts, ideas and feelings; at the same time they should develop thinking and observation skills. So in the classroom, children must go through a process where they are exposed to new knowledge, can relate with prior knowledge and experience, reflect on, and discuss learning content and apply the learning in different situations (Fosnot, 1989).

Lastly terminal competency 4.5 under writing skill focuses on some practical uses of language like ability to write a letter, write an application and filling forms. No question item in the last three years addressed this competency. It is important that the students get to learn and practice useful skills that have immediate application in real life. Drafting a letter or an application for some practical purpose requires general writing skill as well as knowing the specific norms for writing a letter and an application. The exercise of writing a letter or an application can be made very interesting and challenging for the learners and can be a useful

item in assessment. So far what we found is that the tests mainly measure content knowledge of students completing the elementary stage of education.

Reliance on Textbook in Test Construction

Most of the items of Bangla question papers of 2009, 2010 and 2011 are either from the Bangla textbook (Amar Bangla Boi) contents or directly selected from the exercise sections (Path Sikhi) of the textbook contents (poem, prose, stories). It gives us an impression that language learning is confined to textbook contents and selected items of the exercise sections of the contents. The textbook contents should be regarded as tools that initiate and to some extent guide language skill development. They are not meant to set boundaries and confine learning to the set contents. Such a restrictive approach does not enable students to achieve mastery of literacy and oral skills and build the foundation for further learning.

Every year, Q no. 1 asks students to reproduce in writing of the first 8 lines of a poem from the Bangla textbook. This is a traditional question and it cannot literally be considered as a skill or competency. Students need to memorize the 12 poems from the textbook to answer Q no. 1. Q no. 14 asks students to write about thematic understanding of a poem cited from the textbook. Having thematic understanding of a poem is a process expected to be mastered by the learners. Now if question papers follow a trend of selecting poems from the textbook, this potentially motivates learners to just memorize. All test items under Q nos.3, 7 and 13 are copied exactly from exercise sections of the textbook. In most cases the items ask for factual information from the contents. Again, questions that ask for word meaning (Q no. 4), making sentence with given words (Q no. 5), antonym/synonym for given words (Q no. 10), one word expression for a phrase (Q no. 11) are taken from exercise sections of textbook contents.

Table 2

below shows the test items in each year's PSC and numbers of items which were copied directly from textbook exercises. In 2009, out of a total 88 test items, 57 (64.77 %) were taken from textbook exercises. In 2010, out of a total 72 test units, 42 (58.33 %) were taken from textbook exercises. And in year 2011, out of total 66 test units, 37(56.06 %) were taken from textbook exercises.

Table 2: Total Number and Percentage of Test Items and Test Items Taken from Textbook Exercises

Year	No. of Test Items in the Questions	No. of Test Items taken from Textbook	% of the Test Items taken from Textbook
2009	88	57	64.77
2010	72	42	58.33
2011	66	37	56.06

Note: Each single unit of a question is considered as a distinct test item for analysis. For example, question number 4 in 2011 asks for word meaning of any five words out of 6. Here, the 6 words are considered as 6 different test items.

It can be seen that a majority of test items are copied from the exercise sections of the textbook and the other items are also from the contents of the textbook. It is evident that language skills assessment as well as its teaching are based on memorizing and recalling the textbook content.

VIII. Cognitive Dimensions of the Test Questions

Since Bloom's ground-breaking work on educational goals received worldwide acceptance, curriculum and assessment designers around the world have been considering his learning domains for different levels of education. Bloom's classification (taxonomy) of cognitive levels is widely used as tool to analyse the level and depth required in a question paper. For written answers or to produce any text, we need to activate our cognitive faculty (Kellogg, 2008). If the test questions are mostly from lower cognitive levels, they will measure only lower cognitive abilities. We looked at how the questions are worded and the cognitive intentions behind those words. It was found that test questions for Bangla don't quite assess students' higher cognitive abilities.

Table 3

below shows the distribution of the total 35 test questions in the year of 2009, 33 test questions in 2010 and 31 test questions in 2011 according to their cognitive levels. In the analysis we found that in terminal examination of 2009, 27 questions (77.14 %) out of a total of 35, assess students' knowledge level performance. There was no question found for assessing analysis and evaluation level of the cognitive domain in 2009. In fact there was not a single question at the evaluation level found in any of the question papers for the past three years. Only 1 question in 2010 was found to test analytical skill.

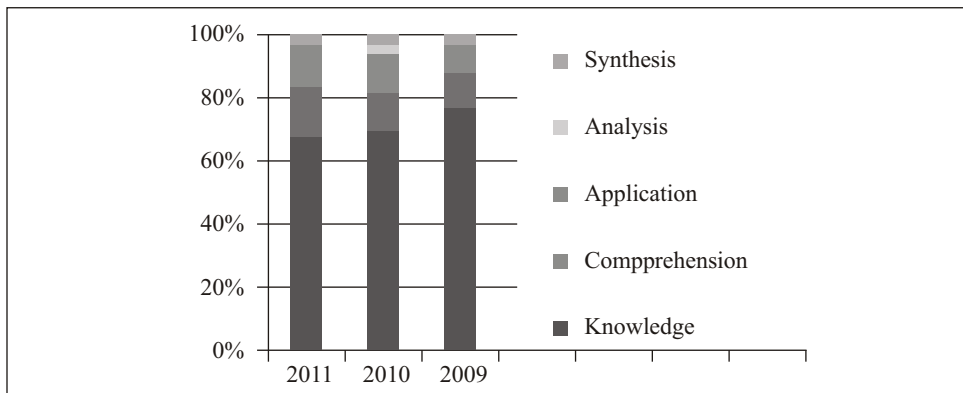
Table 3: Distribution of Test Questions According to Levels of Cognitive Domain

Cognitive Level \ Year	2009		2010		2011	
	No. of Question	%	No. of Question	%	No. of Question	%
Knowledge	27	77.14	23	69.69	21	67.74
Comprehension	4	11.42	4	12.12	5	16.12
Application	3	8.57	4	12.12	4	13
Analysis	0	0	1	3	0	0
Synthesis	1	3.16	1	3	1	3.22
Evaluation	0	0	0	0	0	0

Note: Alternative options are considered as separate questions for example: question number 2 asks for explanation (any one) mentioning source of a poem from two option ka (1st letter of Bangla consonant) and kha (2nd letter of Bangla consonant). Here both ka and kha has been considered as two different test questions.

In 2010, 23 questions (69.69%) out of total 33 assessed students' knowledge level performance and in the following year, 21 questions (67.74%) out of the total of 31 were from knowledge level. It is observed that the predominance of knowledge level questions is being reduced year by year even though in small strides. In 2009, 11.42 percent of the test questions were formulated for comprehension, which increased up to 12.12 percent and 16.12 percent in the following two years. And 8.57%, 12.12% and 13 % of total questions respectively were for assessing application in the three years. It is noteworthy that, there was no test question found on

Figure 1: Bangla Test Questions According to Cognitive Levels in Percentages



evaluation skill in any year and a few test items were on analysis and synthesis skill. Figure 1 presents a comparative picture of the distribution of questions according to cognitive levels.

The analysis has established that the Bangla test questions in the primary completion examination largely measure the skills of recalling factual information and texts from the Bangla textbook. Students cannot demonstrate their skills in different forms of communication through listening and speaking and can do so in a limited way through writing. They are also not challenged to demonstrate higher order cognitive abilities.

IX. Conclusion

Through the review of Bangla test question papers of the PSC examination, several areas of concern have been identified. First, there is an absence of scope to assess some of the basic linguistic abilities of the students such as listening, speaking and reading. As PSC examination includes only written tests, the test questions focus on writing skills. Secondly, instead of testing students' linguistic abilities, the tests ask for specific memorized answers. They do not allow students to communicate their experience and demonstrate observation skills through linguistic expressions. The questions prompt them to reproduce language from the textbook contents. Thirdly, a majority of the test items are taken from exercise

sections of the textbook contents. Such textbook-centeredness of the questions largely negates the purposes underlying the competencies prescribed by the curriculum. Fourthly, as a consequence of the deficiencies noted, students are not required to demonstrate higher order cognitive abilities related to application, analysis and synthesis.

It can be concluded that for Bangla language teaching and learning, the assessment aim doesn't quite match with the curricular aim. The characteristics of the assessment items strongly suggest a backwash effect on primary classroom instruction encouraging memorization and low level cognitive skills rather than building the linguistic and communication skills of students for further education and learning. We looked at the question papers of only one curricular area. We recommend a thorough review of all the test tools used for other subjects in PSC examinations. It is obvious that the authorities responsible for designing PSC and considering effective methodology at the primary level need to address some basic issues on assessment of learning, highlighted in this paper.

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