

## Early Grade Bangla Reading Situation in Nikli Upazila: A Snapshot of Rural Bangladesh

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### Abstract

*Early success in reading is the key to long-term success in school and in lifelong learning. Children who successfully learn to read in the early primary years of school are well prepared to read for learning and for pleasure in later years. Primary school children in Bangladesh are expected to master reading skills by the time they complete their primary level. In fact, the curriculum expectations are that they should be fluent in reading in Bangla by the end of grade II. It has been, however, observed reading in Bangla with comprehension begins to occur only by grade IV or later.*

*This study reports about reading skills and characteristics of grade III students of 10 primary schools in Nikli upazilla of Kishoreganj district. Reading assessment was conducted with a questionnaire based on the EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment) tools developed by RTI International. The interviewed children demonstrated high average letter naming knowledge, but lower word reading skills, and even lower comprehension. On average, they could identify 82% of the 50 letters of the Bangla alphabet correctly, 11 out of 20 (55%) familiar words were read out correctly, and 50% of the made-up words were read correctly. However, almost a quarter of the children did not even make an attempt to answer the five comprehension questions based on a simple text -- 78% did. Out of them, only 6% answered the five questions correctly, and 27% got all answers wrong. It is obvious that reading instruction need to be emphasized and enhanced in order to raise children's levels of fluency and accuracy in reading, thus contributing to reading with comprehension.*

**Keywords:** Early grade reading, early literacy, early grade reading assessment (EGRA)

### 1. Introduction and Background

One of the earliest and fundamental skills children should acquire in school is the ability to read. Lifelong learning and long term success in school depends on early success in reading. In general, students who learn to read at the primary level continue to read for learning and pleasure (Gove and Cvelich, 2011). Success in school and life has to do a lot with proper reading skills.

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Early grades, especially grades I to III, are crucial for learning to read. Students who face difficulty with reading at this stage are at a serious disadvantage. They fall behind in every subject and are unable to keep up with their peers (Abadzi, 2006). These are the children who are most likely to repeat the grades and finally drop out as they fail to attain the required literacy skills with their growing age.

Phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension are the five skills of reading that are critical to becoming capable readers (Gove & Wetterberg, 2011). There is room for practice and improvement if a certain skill is problematic or difficult for students. For this to happen, policy makers have to make the decisions to change practices and train teachers in instructional methods that address the deficits (Abadzi, 2013).

In Bangladesh, it is expected that students will read and write properly by the time they complete the five-year primary level. In fact, the curriculum design assumes that a child would read fluently in Bangla after the completion of grade II. However, there is no central mechanism for measuring reading fluency with understanding.

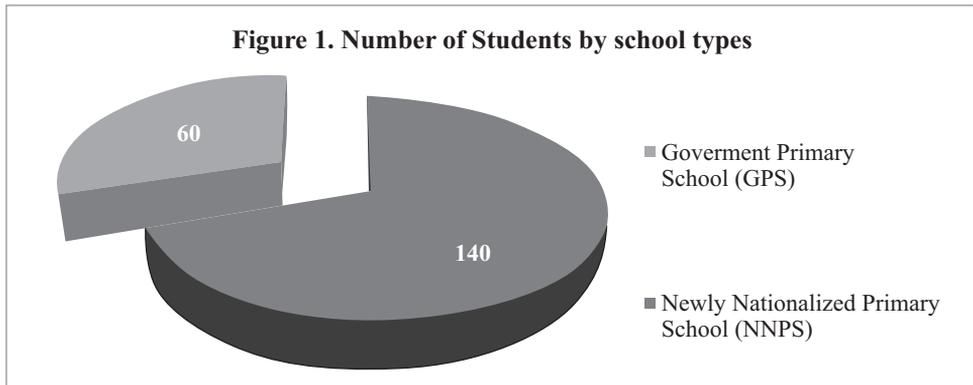
This study reports on reading skills and characteristics of grade III students in 10 primary level schools in Nikli upazilla of Kishoreganj district. There are 7 unions and 57 primary schools (38 Government Primary Schools -- GPS and 19 Newly Nationalized Primary Schools -- NNPS) in Nikli upazilla. Besides, there are 6 Ebtedayee (primary level) madrasahs in the upazilla. Five out of six Ebtedayee madrasahs are attached with Dakhil madrasahs (secondary level) and one is stand-alone. None of the primary schools are attached with secondary schools, though some of them are situated adjacent to the secondary level schools. Beyond these, there are 19 KG (Kinder Garten) schools (low fee private schools) in this upazilla.

## **2. Methodology**

For this study, 10 primary level schools were randomly selected from the 57 primary schools. The mix of Government Primary Schools (GPS) and Newly Nationalized Primary Schools (NNPS) (previously known as Registered Non-government Primary School-RNGPS) were considered by the study team. No primary level Ebtedayee madrasahs were included in the sample (Figure 1).

Interview was conducted with 200 students -- 20 third grade students, boys and girls divided equally, in each of the 10 schools. In case of more than 20 students in the classroom, the selection was random.

The students in the sample were asked about their background characteristics (age, school history, socio-economic status, etc.). To capture health/nutrition status, students were also asked whether they had eaten breakfast in the morning of the assessment. Students were also asked about their family members and their reading habits in the week prior to the assessment (whom they had seen reading, who had read to them, etc.).



The sample of students were then given a literacy test composed of six components administered through five sub-tests: concepts about print, letter awareness, vocabulary (reading of most used words), reading fluency and accuracy (words per minute read correctly and proportion of the passage read correctly, both within the same sub-test), and reading comprehension questions for those who could read independently or oral comprehension questions for those who could not. The pre-designed questionnaire that was used to conduct the reading assessment was designed by using the tools from EGRA (Early Grade Reading Assessment), developed by RTI International with funding from USAID and World Bank. The EGRA instrument includes subtests on letter knowledge or recognizing letters of the alphabet, nonsense word decoding and reading simple (familiar) words, oral reading fluency and understanding sentences as well as a simple paragraph (RTI International, 2009; RTI International, 2015).

The reading test begins with the letters chart, presented on a grid, in which children are asked to identify as many letters as they can. Likewise, for the reading of most-used words, students are presented with a grid of most-used words (identified from the national grade two Bangla language textbook). Finally, students are presented with a reading passage based on common words and grammatical/content structures from the language textbook. If the student can read at least five words correctly in 30 seconds, he or she is classified as a reader and is allowed to complete the passage. The assessor marks the words that the student misses as he or she reads, and this information is used to compute accuracy and fluency. Then the assessor asks the reading comprehension questions (which are based on the passage). If the student cannot read at least five words correctly in 30 seconds, the assessor thanks him/her for his/her time and dismisses the student from remainder of the assessment (RTI International & International Rescue Committee-IRC, 2011).

### 3. Findings on Early Grade Bangla Reading skills

#### **Children's Background**

In January 2017, according to the Upazila Education Office, there were 4,115 children enrolled in grade III in different types of primary education institutions (GPS, NNPS, KG schools, and Ebtedayee madrasah) in Nikli upazila. The students in the study sample were,

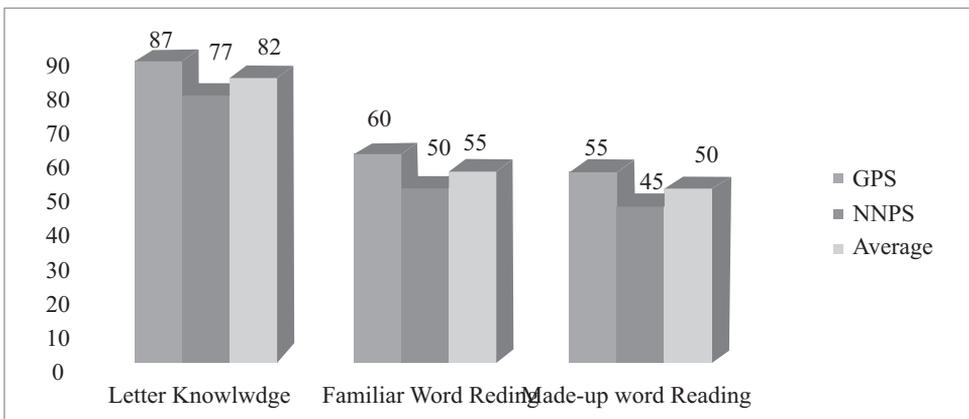
on average, nearly nine (8+) years old, lived with four other family members, and most had electricity and toilets in their homes. Most of the children's families did not possess a television or a refrigerator. More than three quarters never attended any of the Early Childhood Development interventions before primary school and more than five percent had repeated at least one grade. Most ate breakfast on the day the school was visited and appeared healthy. On an average, boys were younger, came from poorer families, and repeated grades less often than girls. These are differences to keep in mind as we consider the early grade Bangla reading skills of children and factors that influence these skills.

### Letter naming knowledge

The test of letter recognition in the EGRA instrument is the most basic of assessments of students' reading preparedness. Letter name knowledge is a consistent predictor of reading development for alphabetic languages (like Bangla, English, and French etc.). In this assessment of letter name knowledge, students were asked to provide the names (not the sounds) of all of the letters that they can within a one-minute period. The full set of letters of the alphabet was listed in random order, 10 letters to a row, using a clear, large, and familiar font in horizontal rows with each letter presented multiple times. Randomization was used to prevent students from reciting a memorized alphabet—that is, to test for actual automaticity of letter recognition and translation of print to sound.

On average, 41 out of 50 letters (82%) of Bangla alphabet were correctly recognized by the interviewed children; with a range from 6 to 50. Thus, the children demonstrated high average letter naming knowledge. There were no difference between the result of boys and girls. Children from GPS (87%) knew more letters than the students from the NNPS (77%) (See Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Reading performance (letter knowledge and word reading) by school type**



### Familiar word reading

Children's decoding skills are often assessed using reading lists of unrelated words. This allows for a purer measure of word recognition and decoding skills as children are unable to guess the next word from the context that they do in reading comprehension paragraphs. For

this study, high-frequency familiar words were selected from early grade reading materials and storybooks for first-, second-, and third-grade materials (progressively increasing in difficulty). The enumerator(s) recorded the number of correct words per minute. If the child completed all of the words before time expired, the time of completion was recorded and the calculations were done accordingly. Correct words read per minute were recorded and scored.

Students were presented with 20 most frequently used words, i.e., very commonly used in the primary level materials in grade I to III. On an average, 55% of the words, 11 out of 20, were read correctly. There was no difference between the boys and the girls. Children in NNPS showed poorer result (50% read correctly) compared to GPS students (60%) (Figure 2).

### **Unfamiliar non-word reading**

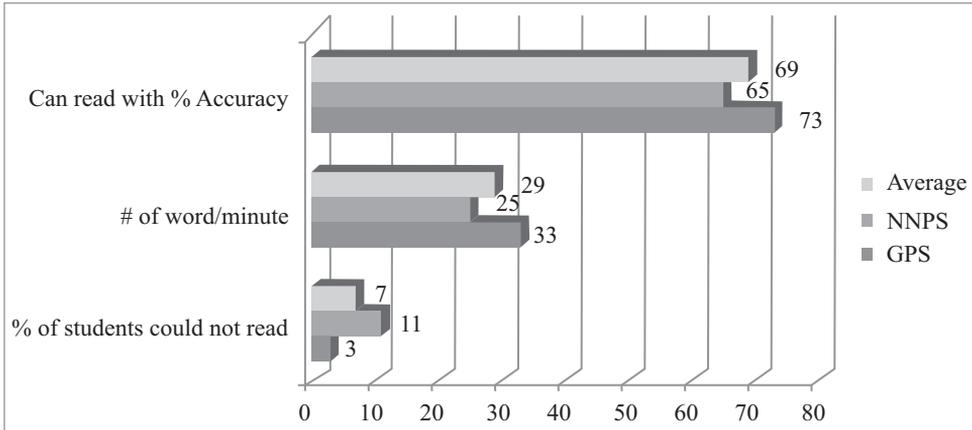
Pseudo-word or non-word reading is a measure of decoding ability and is designed to avoid the problem of sight recognition of words. Many children in the early grades learn to memorize or recognize by sight a broad range of words. To be successful readers, children must combine both decoding and sight recognition skills. Tests that do not include a decoding exercise can overestimate children's ability to read unfamiliar words (as the words tested may be part of the sight recognition vocabulary). The child's score is calculated as the number of correct non-words per minute. If the child completes all of the words before time expires, the time of completion is recorded and the calculations are done based on that time period.

Children were asked to read 20 non real Bangla words which follow the protocol of Bangla writing; On average, 50% of the words, with some variation for school type, which was not statistically significant. Correct responses for NNPS were 45% and for GPS 55% (Figure 2).

### **Fluency and Accuracy**

Fluency (words per minute read correctly) and accuracy (proportion of the passage read correctly) are presented together here because they are measured together in a single subtest in which learners read a passage aloud. The number of words learners read correctly in a minute is tracked for fluency. Fluency was measured by counting the number of words students read correctly in one minute of reading the grade level passage. Accuracy is a skill related to fluency, and measures the overall number of words a student reads correctly in a given passage; regardless of the time it takes him or her to finish the passage. As the student continues to read after the first minute, the total number of words read correctly from the passage as a whole was computed for accuracy. On this assessment, 11 percent of NNPS children and 4 percent of GPS could not read ten words in one minute (Figure 3).

On an average, it was found that children could read at a rate of 29 words per minute correctly, and with 69 percent accuracy. A benchmark for reading with comprehension has not been established for Bangla. According to Abadzi, a minimum reading speed of 45–60 words per minute is necessary to read and comprehend the simplest text in English. More complex texts require faster reading which means reading speed must rise with every grade. The suggested norm for US is that the average student should read at about 150 words per minute by grade 6 (Abadzi, 2008). One reason for the failure to achieve a reasonable reading speed is the large number of children unable to read connected text at all (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Reading with fluency and accuracy by school type****Reading comprehension**

Oral reading fluency is a measure of overall reading competence: the ability to translate letters into sounds, unify sounds into words, process connections, relate text to meaning, and make inferences to fill in missing information (Hasbrouck & Tindal, 2006). As skilled readers translate text into spoken language, they combine these tasks in a seemingly effortless manner; because oral reading fluency captures this complex process it can be used to characterize overall reading skill. Poor performance on a reading comprehension tool would suggest that the student had trouble with decoding, or with reading fluently enough to comprehend, or with vocabulary. Students are scored on the number of correct words per minute and the number of comprehension questions answered acceptably. There were three student scores for this sub-test: the proportion of words read, time per word, and proportion of questions correctly answered.

Various aspects were kept in mind while preparing the assessment; one paragraph of narrative was selected from a children's book which is not a textbook in school. The beginning section of the narrative was an introduction of characters, a middle section contained some dilemma, and an end section was an action resolving the dilemma. The common character names were intentionally changed, so that the students don't give an answer which is familiar to them, rather than based on the text. Local culture was kept in mind in the narrative and it had some complex words and sentences. Large, clear, familiar print and good spacing between lines were used to facilitate student reading. Pictures were not a part of this assessment. Comprehension questions included choice and fact-based questions as well as one question requiring inference from the text.

The result of the assessment was at best a mixed picture: 156 students, or 78%, made an attempt to answer the questions on comprehension after they were asked to read the passage by themselves. Almost a quarter did not even make an effort to answer. Those who made an attempt, 27 percent students were unable to answer any question correctly. Both GPS and NNPS school students answered 2 out of 5 questions correctly on average. Most of the students were able to answer between 1 and 3 questions correctly, while 12 percent gave 4 correct answers and 6 percent answered all of them correctly (Table 1).

**Table 1. Comprehension question performance**

Students who attempted to answer the comprehension questions	78%
Of those attempting to answer, unable to answer any question correctly	27%
Of those attempting to answer, four out of five correct answers	12%
Of those attempting to answer, all correct answers	6%

**Listening comprehension**

A listening comprehension assessment involves passages that are read aloud by the enumerator; students then respond to oral comprehension questions. Testing of listening comprehension separately from reading comprehension is important due to the different ways in which learners approach, process, and respond to text. Listening comprehension tests have been around for some time and in particular have been used as an alternative assessment for disadvantaged children with relatively reduced access to print (Orr & Graham, 1968). The purpose of this assessment is to see whether the student can listen to a passage being read and then answer several questions correctly with a word or a simple statement. Poor performance on a listening comprehension tool would suggest that children simply do not have the basic vocabulary that the reading materials contain, or that they have difficulty processing what they hear. Students are scored on the number of correct statements they give as their answers (out of the total number of questions). Questions with only “yes” or “no” answers are generally avoided.

There were students (22% or 44 students in total) who were unable to read and did not even attempt to read the passage. The assessors, in these cases, read the passage to the students and asked the five comprehension questions. Among both the GPS students and NNPS students, those who listened to the passage were not able to answer more than one question correctly.

**4. Conclusion and Recommendation**

It has been seen over and over again that our children struggle with reading competency. Various measures to overcome this problem in the primary school system have been attempted, but the activities inside classrooms have still been unable to produce the desired results; all in all, it has been disappointing. Schools are using the results of early grade reading assessments to improve reading instruction in many parts of the world (Save the Children US, 2017). By using student performance data, school systems can address learning deficits by comparing the identified areas of need with existing standards and curriculum to determine whether change is needed in the amount, focus, or quality of instruction. Based on the observed performance of boys and girls in these two school types, the following suggestions can be made:

- It is important to provide attention in reading instruction to all five elements of reading competency.
- At the end of the primary cycle it is expected that children will reach development benchmarks in vocabulary, confidence in expression and understanding the context of the reading content; these can be achieved by oral language development and the comprehension-focused elements of reading instruction.

- Priority should be given to work on establishing grade level benchmarks for reading competency, particularly, on fluency, accuracy and speed.
- It is important to focus on achieving full alphabet knowledge among the early graders and help them capitalize on their letter naming knowledge to become more skillful readers of familiar words.
- To overcome significant gaps in Bangla reading skills, children in NNPS will need more support compared to the GPS. In both types of schools, uncommon letters were most challenging; so the teachers need to focus on activities/games/strategies that teach and review these letters and their sounds.
- Comprehension in Bangla reading can be achieved earlier in both types of schools with some extra support. Teachers should focus on activities that support children's reading in groups as well as through reading buddy pairs; thus, children who are listening or reading, may trace the words with their finger as a more advanced reader reads to them
- Making time and space for reading instruction every day is necessary. Teachers should encourage daily reading – with peers/reading buddies, family members and groups– and during these practices, allow time to listen to each other carefully, follow along in the text and offer input to correct reading and intonation.

Overall, learner centered instruction is as important in teaching reading as in other subjects. Children must be supported in various ways -- through engaging them in remedial activities or through partnering them with the stronger readers. In general, the formative assessment should be emphasized to identify early the children at risk of falling behind and to diagnose how to help these children keep up with the class. Teacher training has to offer teachers practical suggestions for instructing classes with varied ability levels of students.

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