

Volunteer Tutoring for Struggling Readers of English at the Early Level in Bangladesh: An Action Research

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Abstract

This paper reports on an action research on intervention through volunteer tutors for struggling readers of English at the early level in Bangladesh. The proposition of the action research is that volunteer tutor support to assist the struggling learners who are slow in reading compared to other students in a class can help overcome their challenge. A sample of students is taken from one of the better-known English medium schools in Dhaka for a trial with volunteer tutors. The trial shows that if volunteer tutoring could be implemented at an early level, the reading level of students, who struggle to read and comprehend in a second language other than their mother tongue, can be motivated and helped to overcome their problems.

Key words: *Struggling reader, interventions, early level, second language*

1. Introduction

English medium schools in Bangladesh use English as the medium for communication and instruction for all subjects, even though it is not the mother tongue and rarely used at home. As it is the students' second language (L2), they try to master it through regular instruction in school, with the help of their teachers. But there are always struggling readers in every class who are not able to follow the instruction and fall behind in the class. They are always slow in understanding the lessons and are not able to express themselves or explain their difficulties. They are often introverts and shy and are not willing to share their thoughts to the class teacher.

In this article, I have reported the current practices in one of the well-known English medium schools of Bangladesh (Sir John Wilson School), where the teachers always use English in their lessons. It was found, as expected, that there were struggling readers who failed to keep up with their lessons, because they did not acquire the necessary language proficiency. This was manifested in their being slow in reading, or their reading skill was very low compared to the average student in the class.

Trying to understand the problem and designing a remedy for the slow readers, I proposed an action research project with a sample of students who would be assisted by a volunteer tutor in reading, in addition to regular classroom instruction. A control group, who did not receive the intervention, was observed for comparison. In designing the trial, I was inspired by the

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work of Jack Cassidy and Drew Cassidy of Texas A&M University, Corpus Christi, Texas, USA, who reviewed research in early literacy and identified “hot” practices that produced results (Cassidy and Cassidy, 1999 and other years).

2. The struggling learners at the early level of schooling

The idea of struggling learners due to poor literacy skills is not new. For example, the struggling learner was a topic of discussion in the 1990s in USA and in 2002 the program *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* supported by the Federal Government was designed to ensure that there would be no child overlooked in a classroom.

The struggling learners are those having the following traits:

- They are slow in understanding the lesson.
- They are usually introvert, as they do not want to share their problems with the class teacher.
- They are poor in comprehension and cannot express what they understand from the instructor.
- They are slower than the other students in reading and fall behind others in the class in performance.
- They are not necessarily learners with disability or dyslexic (though these conditions are often not detected or overlooked).
- They are not able to cope with the tempo of the instructors in the class.
- They often face difficulties in decoding certain phonetic sounds.
- They lack fluency in reading.
- They are unable to transform knowledge into learning for themselves.

Research shows that as the struggling readers progress through the grade levels, they fall farther behind and their academic distance from those who read well grows more pronounced (The Learning First Alliance, 1998; Rashotte, Toregesen, & Wagner, 1997; National Reading Panel, 1999; Torgesen, 1998).

The struggling readers are frequently overlooked in the Bangladesh classrooms. Although research has shown that attention and support to the struggling learners can help them to be successful in school, (Ciolfi and Ryan, 2011), most schools in our country do not take such initiatives.

3. The Concept of Response to Intervention (RTI)

The concept of response to intervention (RTI) has been used to identify the needs of the struggling learners, particularly, in their reading ability in English. Originally developed by Marie Clay (1979) in New Zealand, this short-term intervention program was first introduced to the United States at Ohio State University, which soon became a training site for teachers and university professors throughout the world. This intensive instructional program targeted emergent readers who were at risk of failure in reading.

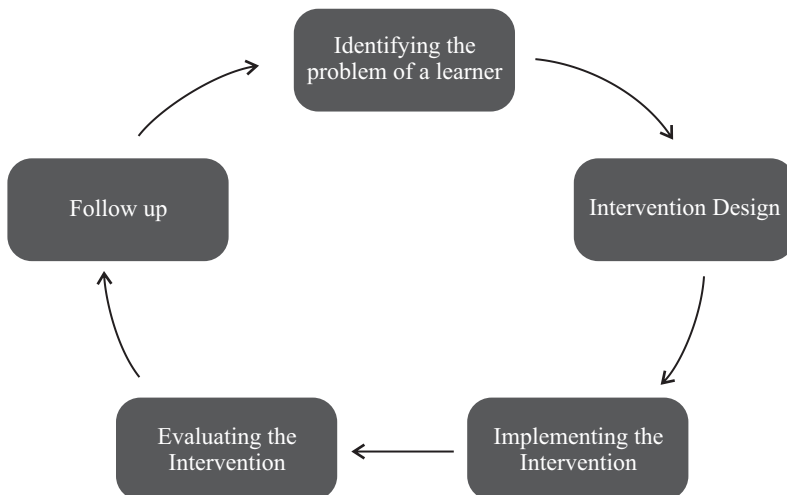
In 2001 the strategies of intervention were initiated in the schools of USA with Federal Government support which showed positive results by 2006 (Cameron, Parks, Schulte, 2006). The emphasis was on not labeling a child as ‘disabled’ for poor reading, without first trying out changes in instruction in the classroom. Children with weak reading skills were too readily being put in the ‘special need’ category. After the Act for Individuals with Disabilities Education (IDEA) was signed in July 1, 2001 the strategies were advocated for implementing special interventions for learners who failed to follow the lessons in the classroom. In one research it was shown that the effectiveness of pedagogical approaches actually depended on how the students were served by high quality instruction and what interventions to struggling students were available (Torgesen, 2007).

In an RTI approach, the students, the teachers and the parents are together responsible to improve reading skills of students. To reduce the academic risk of low performance, RTI does two things: (a) It requires preparation of an instructional plan on how to teach the students, and (b) It emphasizes how with specific steps the special needs students in a class can be helped.

RTI suggests that the early grade teachers follow a model to assist the struggling learners through the following sequential steps:

- Identifying the problem of a learner
- Preparing an intervention design
- Implementing the intervention
- Evaluating the intervention
- Follow up. (See figure 1)

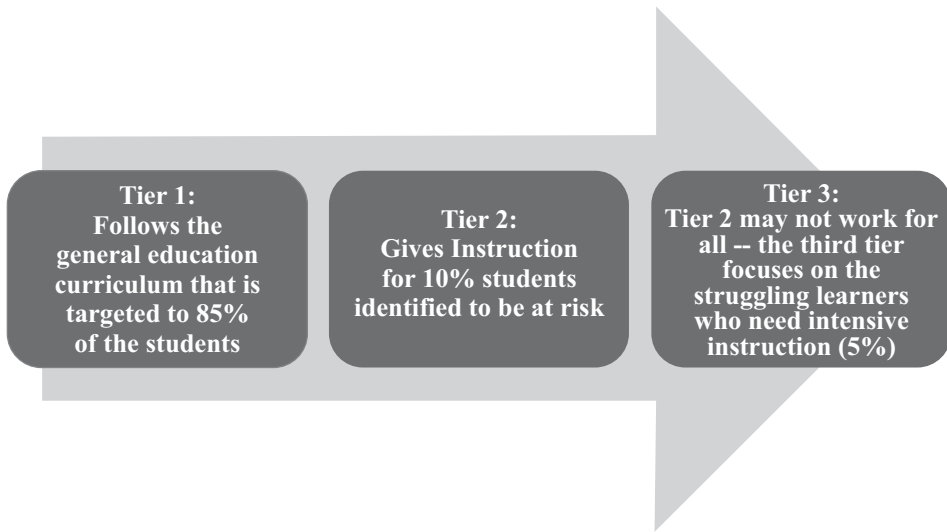
Figure 1: The Problem Solving Model for the Struggling Learner at the Early Grade Level



Source: Cameron, et al., 2006.

This model was further refined and the Standard Protocol Model (Carney and Stiefel, 2008) was proposed to help the struggling learners in USA. The three-tier model was developed and was considered as the most effective to help the struggling readers in English. It aims to do the following things for a reader who is striving to understand the text (Figure 2).

Figure 2: How RTI works for the struggling readers in a classroom: the three tier model



Source: Carney and Stiefel, 2008

4. The Action Research and the Methodology

The concept of RTI is not well-known or practiced by early grade instructors in Bangladesh yet. To apply a remedial approach for language teaching, I chose a renowned English medium schools of Bangladesh where English is the main language for instruction. The sample was taken from the classes of two sections of KG-1 where the total number of students was sixty. The teachers followed the RTI model by implementing the following steps:

- They emphasized phonology and phonetics as the struggling readers were weak in this respect;.
- They designed the instruction focusing on achieving oral fluency.
- They gave exercises on letter identification
- They followed the Target Language (English) for all of their instruction.

Data were collected through survey on the struggling learners on English language performance from those who received the intervention and from a comparable group who did not.

5. The implementation of RTIs for the struggling readers

Initially, the teachers followed the regular instruction for the learners. They operated at tier-1 where they reached at best 85% of the students with their lessons. When the teachers found that some of the students were not responding, they tried to change the tier. Ultimately, they implemented tier-3 where they took steps for the failing learners who were slow in understanding the text, unable to follow instructions of teachers, and were generally slow in reading. Tier 3 involved the intervention through volunteer tutors.

The idea of volunteer-tutoring was first introduced by Cassidy and Cassidy in 1999 where emphasis was given on the weak learners who were slow in learning and following the lesson in a classroom. The volunteer tutors performed the following tasks:

- i. Helped the struggling readers to understand the context of the lesson;
- ii. Assisted the readers by implementing tier-3 to increase their ability to read
- iii. Analysed the problems of the struggling readers in a classroom;
- iv. Ensured extra time for the learners who did not keep pace with the other learners;
- v. Followed up these learners' performance and changing tiers as needed for the next lesson.

In volunteer tutoring the following things are ensured:

1. a coordinator who is ideally a reading specialist guides the process;
2. consistent onsite supervision is provided;
3. early recruitment, training, and placement of tutors at the beginning of the school year are ensured;
4. systematic documentation of instruction and assessment is maintained; and
5. instruction is geared to supporting the classroom curriculum.

In the small-scale action research in Bangladesh, these conditions were not fulfilled. But efforts were made to create a conducive environment for the trial with the cooperation of the principal and the teachers.

The teachers of the two early grade sections of the school were persuaded to implement the volunteer tutoring trial for one term (one term is for five months). First, they helped identify the struggling readers from assessing their grade obtained in the reading tests, grade obtained in the oral tests and figured out the number in the class who lacked at least the average reading ability. Twelve students from a section of 30 were identified as slow readers.

Initially, in a pre-trial phase, the teachers continued their usual teaching approach, without implementing any of the intervention measures. At the end of this phase, they found these learners' performance as shown below.

Table 1. Performance of KG-1 Students before Volunteer Tutoring Intervention

<i>Decoding phonetic symbols</i>	<i>Understanding English texts</i>	<i>Comprehending the text</i>	<i>Ability to reproduce the instruction</i>	<i>Fluency</i>
10-12 students failed	Most of them could not understand the text	Only 6-7 students could comprehend the idea of the text	4-5 students could reproduce	5 students were found to be fluent

After analyzing this data, it was decided that the plan for volunteer tutoring would be applied as a remedy. In implementing the plan, the following steps were taken.

A. Giving extra time for the struggling readers.

The English teachers started giving extra time to the struggling readers. To ensure this they tried to identify their problems in decoding specific phonetic symbols. Examples of problems found: 5 students failed to recognize the difference between ‘b’ and ‘d’; 3 students did not recognize the difference between ‘p’ and ‘b’; 2 failed to distinguish between ‘c’ and ‘k’.

They gave exercises on these issues by giving drills, mimics and tried to prepare lessons to show the difference in pronunciation of these phonemes.

B. Offering incentives for the struggling readers.

The teachers took motivational steps by rewarding students for their effort and performance with small gifts such as pencils, erasers etc. Mostly they used verbal utterances to praise learners. They kept record of these incentives and found that about 10 students were especially responsive to incentives and 6 students were more willing to speak in the class than before. But four were still found to be relatively unresponsive. The teachers took these four students to be high-risk struggling readers who were very shy and introvert as learners and needed very special attention.

C. Talking to parents of the struggling readers.

The teachers talked to the parents of the struggling readers during the parents’ meeting. They also arranged extra meetings with the parents fortnightly to follow up the learners’ performance while at home. The teachers instructed the parents to encourage their children to share their ideas on what they learned in school, to tell their children stories during bedtime based on the difficulties they faced, and to tell children about the importance of listening to the teachers inside the classroom. The parents committed themselves to cooperate with the teachers and the routine was followed for three months. After three months the teachers found marked differences in student response and participation in the class. The students shared their own thoughts more with the teacher, asked teacher for help, and paid attention to teacher’s instruction.

D. Reading texts of interest to the students

As a part of volunteer tutoring, the teachers tried to find topics of interest to the slow readers. They found that seven students liked stories on animals, three liked stories on travel and two

students liked stories about fairies. The teachers gave the other students reading material from the curriculum whereas they gave these 12 students different materials of particular interest to them.

The class was divided into three groups. In Group A, there were the seven students, who were struggling in reading with the regular textbook, and performed poorly during the term. In Group B, the other struggling readers were given books that they liked and at the end of the term these students were reading more books and their interest in reading increased. In Group C, students not facing any special difficulty read books as in the curriculum. They were able to follow the lessons and improved their reading ability during the term, as expected.

E. Giving more time to the struggling readers to complete tasks

The class teachers gave more time to the struggling readers to complete the tasks assigned to them. They gave each of them 5 minutes more than the other students for their reading task and most were able to complete their task with the extra time allowed to them.

F. Giving students positive stimuli

The class teachers tried out the benefits of positive stimuli in their lessons. In some instances students were praised verbally and applauded when they responded correctly; in other cases such positive feedback were not offered. It was observed that the struggling readers responded and showed more enthusiasm in the first instances. With positive stimuli, more of the struggling readers answered teacher's questions, paid attention to teachers' instruction, and more of them had eye contact with teachers.

The teachers reported that they used the following feedback strategies for motivating the learners;

- They were particular about greeting and talking to the struggling readers more often.
- They tried to maintain eye contact with the slow readers during the class time.
- They used positive words like 'I am proud of you', 'very well done' etc. with the struggling readers.
- They did not remonstrate with the slow readers if they made an error. Rather, they overlooked the errors.

6. Recapitulating the findings

The following points may be mentioned as a recapitulation of the findings from the action research.

- The struggling readers could perform better if they were given reading topics of interest to them.
- They need to be motivated by their class teachers to complete their task inside the classroom.
- They needed extra time to complete the task successfully.

- They needed motivation from their parents at home to complete their reading tasks.
- Their concentration and attention to the task increased when they were given positive feedback or stimuli.

7. Limitations of the Study and Conclusion

The following limitations were observed in conducting the action research:

- The school curriculum does not specifically offer the option to allow students extra time to complete tasks inside the classroom.
- The number of struggling readers is not necessarily large in a class, but the normal teaching method and class routine do not allow teachers giving extra attention to the struggling readers.
- The parents are not always able to support their struggling children. Some parents were not willing to accept the truth that their children had difficulties.
- The class size is a challenge to assist these learners. With 30 or more students in a class, it is difficult to help by giving extra attention even with volunteer tutoring. Ideally, a class size should be around 15 in early grades.

In Bangladesh, the concepts of the struggling readers, its cumulative adverse effect and possible remedial actions are not well understood or widely accepted. The early level is clearly vital for developing reading skills in a second language like English. Effective interventions can help the struggling readers and make a permanent difference for them.

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