

Voices Unheard: Exploring English Reading Proficiency in Rural Primary Schools of North Bengal, Bangladesh

Nawrin Sultana

Teacher, Experimental School, Primary Teachers Training Institute, Lalmonirhat
nawrinsultana.luna@gmail.com

Abstract

This research investigates the difficulties impacting English reading skills among students in ten government primary schools in North Bengal, Bangladesh. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach alongside a basic reading comprehension test, data were gathered from 100 students (20 from each grade, I–V) and two groups of teachers, those with and without specialized English training. The results indicate that limited teacher expertise, lack of adequate teaching materials, ineffective teaching methods, and insufficient parental involvement significantly hinder students' reading progress. Although some teachers received formal English training, their classroom application was weak due to resource shortages and large class sizes. Additionally, students' minimal exposure to English outside of school further limited their understanding and vocabulary development. The study also points out a disconnect between curriculum objectives and actual teaching practices, highlighting inconsistencies between policy and implementation. To address these challenges, focused teacher training, better resource provision, and increased community participation are necessary to foster fair and inclusive English learning opportunities in rural Bangladesh.

Article History

Article Received: 21-08-25

Article accepted: 21-11-25

Article published: 23-11-25

Key Words:

English reading
proficiency; rural
education; government
primary schools; reading
comprehension; teacher
training

Introduction

Language is the main means of communicating human needs, thoughts and emotions. In the context of education, the proficiency of a second language. English has become an essential component of academic and professional development in an increasingly globalized world. However, empirical studies indicate that primary school students in rural Bangladesh continue to struggle with English skills, especially reading comprehension, i.e., the ability to understand and interpret written texts (Barrett et al., 2007). Students struggle to read English when they try to understand written texts in the language. Reading English loudly is a great challenge for students because the structure of words and sentences is very unfamiliar and foreign to them. These struggles are particularly evident in rural areas without English, where students have difficulty decoding, vocabulary recognition, and comprehension. Gove & Cvelich, 2011). For Bangladeshi students, literacy in English involves the ability to read with the appropriate understanding and fluency in terms of grade and age. The development of these skills requires explicit teaching of strategies for understanding and opportunities for independent interpretation of texts. Research shows that techniques such as scanning, checking and finding information (Walter & Benson, 2012) are only effective if they are supported by reflection, practice and reinforcement-

elements that are often lacking in rural primary schools. The minimum objective of this level of English instruction is to enable students to understand simple texts, instructions and to read their textbooks efficiently (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016). Many students in rural primary schools in northern Bangladesh, Bangladesh, have not achieved the expected grade-based competencies in English due to persistent systemic barriers. These include a shortage of qualified and subject-based English teachers, inadequate classroom infrastructure, scarcity of teaching materials, and inconsistent use of available resources. Additionally, limited teacher motivation, unsystematic classroom management, and irregular monitoring from authorities contribute to poor learning outcomes. However, most students in rural primary schools of North Bengal struggle to achieve basic English language competencies due to challenges in teaching–learning practices and limitations in their learning environment (Gove & Cvelich, 2011; Pretorius & Spaull, 2016). Contributing factors include a shortage of trained teachers, particularly those with subject-based English training (Hossain, 2020; Rahman, 2018), inadequate classroom infrastructure, and limited teaching materials (Akter & Karim, 2019). Additionally, some teachers rely on traditional teaching aids superficially, especially during inspections or training sessions, rather than to enhance learning, while unsystematic classroom management further impedes student progress (Hossain & Chowdhury, 2021). The problem are also related to some other factors such as lack of trained teachers (more specifically subject- based trained teachers especially on English), inadequate classroom infrastructure, shortage of teaching materials as well as teachers’ unwillingness to use teaching materials with using so- called and traditional teaching materials just to show that they are using anything for teaching when the classroom is visited by the higher officials or authority and the teachers are on BTPT training, unsystematic classroom- management and so on

In this study, English competency refers to the basic skills primary students are expected to acquire listening, speaking, reading, and writing and particularly the ability to recognize words, decode sentences, and understand grade-level texts. English reading proficiency, however, focuses on students’ ability to read aloud, comprehend, and interpret texts effectively, including fluency, vocabulary understanding, and applying reading strategies. In rural North Bengal, limited exposure to English, lack of trained teachers, and inadequate teaching materials often hinder students from progressing from basic competency to functional reading proficiency. Given the growing importance of English education in today’s global context, it is essential to examine the way English is taught and learned in rural primary schools and to capture the perspectives of students and teachers on factors influencing reading abilities. This study aims to investigate the complex challenges that hampered the development of English-language reading among primary students in rural North Bengal, to expand the often ignored voices of learners and teachers, and to reveal the gaps between curriculum intentions and classroom realities.

Background of this study

Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, and Jerome Bruner highlighted that children’s cognitive growth is deeply connected to how they build knowledge within social settings, with language development—such as connecting sounds, words, and meanings—playing a vital role in communication (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978; Bruner, 1983). Building on these ideas, language education researchers introduced the concept of Emergent Literacy, which stresses the importance of offering young students ample opportunities to listen, speak, read, and write, as well as to interact with peers through meaningful activities (Whitehurst

& Lonigan, 1998). At the primary school level, English teaching focuses on helping students develop all four language skills through engaging and participatory methods. Among these skills, the ability to read and understand texts suited to learners' levels is key to academic achievement (Piper et al., 2018). However, students in rural primary schools in Bangladesh often encounter many obstacles to becoming proficient readers. These challenges include a lack of teaching materials, dependence on traditional lecture-style instruction, limited use of interactive or activity-based learning, and teachers' unwillingness or inability to utilize diverse teaching resources (Hossain, 2020; Yazhou et al., 2023; Faisal & Ali, 2024). Teacher manuals are frequently missing or poorly prepared, and schools often do not have visual aids, projectors, or language labs, which restricts opportunities for practicing listening and comprehension. These systemic and infrastructural issues contribute to low English reading skills among rural students and lead to inefficient use of teaching time and resources (Barrett et al., 2007). Although the national curriculum emphasizes communicative competence, its practical application in rural classrooms is weak. Additionally, there is a lack of empirical studies on how students in rural North Bengal develop reading skills or how teachers apply English reading teaching methods in these settings. Addressing this gap is essential to better understand the challenges of teaching English in rural primary schools and to find ways to improve reading outcomes for students in Bangladesh.

Reading proficiency is a key aspect of learning English as a language, as it enables students to understand and interpret written texts, acquire new vocabulary, and develop comprehension skills. It is also essential for effective communication, allowing learners to make sense of written information and express ideas clearly. Strong reading proficiency supports overall language development, including listening, speaking, and writing, and serves as a foundation for academic success and meaningful engagement with English in everyday contexts. Most of the students of rural primary schools of North- Bengal area of Bangladesh is unable to attain the primary English language competencies due to prevailing challenges of the teaching-learning practices at the same time due to their learning environment. The problems are also related to several factors, including lack of trained teachers—more specifically subject-based trained teachers in English—insufficient classroom infrastructure, and shortage of teaching materials (Sharmin, 2019; Khan, 2020). In many cases, teachers rely on so-called traditional teaching materials or superficial aids merely to demonstrate teaching activity when classrooms are visited by higher officials or during BTPT training, rather than to enhance student learning. Unsatisfactory classroom management and inconsistent instructional practices further impede student progress. National statistics from BANBEIS (2022/23) indicate persistent disparities in resources, teaching materials, and teacher-student ratios between rural and urban schools, which compound these challenges and contribute to low English reading proficiency among rural primary students.

Purpose of this study

This study primarily aims to investigate the challenges faced by students in rural primary schools of North Bengal, Bangladesh, in achieving proficiency in reading English, as well as to identify the factors contributing to these difficulties. The national curriculum outlines 13 grade-specific competencies in English intended to enhance students' reading abilities. When students meet these competencies, they should be able to read both aloud and silently, recognize words, phrases, sentences, and punctuation appropriate for their grade

level, understand texts, and respond to related questions. English textbooks at the primary level in Bangladesh are designed to support these competencies, including activities for both oral and silent reading. However, despite this well-structured curriculum, many rural students struggle to meet the expected competencies. They often find it hard to decode words into basic sounds, grasp sentences and passages, and understand text-based exercises (RTI International, 2011). Additional factors such as limited exposure to reading and language activities, lack of focus, and inadequate support from teachers and parents worsen these issues, even though students generally have a strong interest in learning English (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016; UNESCO, 2016). This research seeks to thoroughly examine these difficulties by comparing curriculum goals with actual student outcomes to uncover the obstacles that impede reading proficiency in rural English education.

Literature review

English reading skills are a fundamental part of literacy development and are crucial for participating in the global knowledge economy, especially in post-colonial countries where English plays a key role in formal education (Baker, 2011). For children living in multilingual and low-income environments, learning to read in English presents distinct challenges influenced by language, teaching methods, and socio-economic factors (Cummins, 2000). Worldwide research has shown that difficulties with English reading at the primary level often stem from limited early exposure to the language, weak phonological awareness, and inadequate instruction in decoding and comprehension techniques (Snow, Burns & Griffin, 1998; Grabe & Stoller, 2002). In settings where English is not spoken at home, young learners face obstacles not only in acquiring vocabulary but also in understanding the unfamiliar structure and sounds of English (Gove & Cvelich, 2011). These issues become more pronounced when students are expected to quickly shift from learning how to read to using reading as a tool for learning in a foreign language (Walter & Benson, 2012). Several international studies have highlighted the effectiveness of phonics-based teaching and explicit instruction in comprehension strategies for improving English reading skills. Research from Kenya, Uganda, and India under the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) initiative found that early literacy programs incorporating structured phonics and interactive reading methods significantly boosted word recognition and comprehension (RTI International, 2011). These results indicate that reading difficulties in low-income areas are not solely due to poverty but also arise from a mismatch between teaching approaches and linguistic realities. The skills and quality of teachers are crucial factors that can either support or hinder reading development. In Bangladesh, especially in rural regions like North Bengal, primary school teachers often lack sufficient training in English teaching methods and are unfamiliar with effective strategies such as scaffolding, guided reading, or differentiated instruction (Hossain, 2020). A large-scale study across multiple low- and middle-income countries, including Bangladesh, demonstrated that professional development programs focused on reading pedagogy, formative assessment, and lesson planning led to significant improvements in students' reading performance (Piper et al., 2018). This underscores that, as in other low-income contexts, strengthening teacher skills and providing well-structured, contextually relevant literacy programs are essential for enhancing English reading proficiency among rural students in Bangladesh.

In rural Bangladesh, particularly in the North Bengal area, primary school teachers often have limited training in teaching English and are not familiar with instructional methods like scaffolding, guided reading, or differentiated teaching. The scarcity of teaching resources, dependence on traditional lecture methods, and low literacy levels among parents further hinder children's literacy development (Pretorius & Spaul, 2016; Hossain, 2020; Faisal & Ali, 2024). Many children start school with little exposure to English, reflecting broader social and home environment challenges (Heath, 1983). Research also shows that learning to read in one's native language supports the acquisition of English reading skills, underscoring the added difficulties in multilingual settings (UNESCO, 2016).

Despite these insights, few studies have specifically examined rural primary schools in North Bengal, where English reading skills remain weak. Most existing research focuses on general rural or low-income settings but does not thoroughly investigate how curriculum requirements, teacher training, teaching practices, and socio-cultural factors interact locally. This study aims to fill that gap by exploring the challenges students face in reading English proficiently and the underlying causes in North Bengal's rural primary schools, with the goal of informing sustainable and locally relevant educational approaches.

In many rural areas, including rural Bangladesh, teachers often receive minimal training in English teaching methods and lack familiarity with strategies such as scaffolding, guided reading, or differentiated instruction (Barrett et al., 2007). Socio-cultural and home environment factors also play a significant role. Children's literacy habits are deeply rooted in their community's cultural norms (Grabe & Stoller, 2002; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). In homes where parents do not speak English or where books are scarce, children frequently enter school with limited early English literacy experiences, which affects their ability to engage effectively with reading activities (Heath, 1983). Students' difficulties with reading are worsened by the lack of reading materials both at home and at school, highlighting the importance of exposure to print-rich environments (Pretorius and Spaul, 2016). In multilingual contexts, language-of-instruction policies also contribute to reading challenges. Learning to read in the mother tongue aids in learning to read in English, yet English reading difficulties remain high in the local area (UNESCO, 2016). This study addresses a vital research gap by supporting the creation of sustainable, locally tailored educational strategies aimed at improving reading proficiency among rural primary school students.

Research questions and methodological matrix

Research Questions	Sources of data	Tools	Analysis Techniques
1. What are the difficulties faced by students in reading English proficiently in rural primary schools of North-Bengal, Bangladesh?	100 students and 50 teachers from 10 different rural primary schools of North- Bengal area of Bangladesh	<i>Data Collection Tools for Teachers:</i> Semi-structured Interviews – 50 interviews (1 per teacher) to understand teaching practices, challenges,	Thematic Analysis (Identifying and analyzing the patterns in students' reading difficulties in English)

		and perceptions about students' reading difficulties. Classroom Observation – observing teacher instruction and strategies used to teach English reading. <i>Data Collection Tools for Students:</i> Reading Comprehension Test – to assess word recognition, sentence decoding, comprehension of texts, and ability to answer questions based on passages. Classroom Observation – observing students' reading behaviors (reading aloud, engagement, participation, use of strategies). Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with Students – 10 FGDs (1 per school) with 8–10 students each to explore perceptions, challenges, and experiences related to reading English.	
--	--	--	--

2. How do the teachers of those primary schools perceive and respond to the students' struggles in English reading?	50 teachers from 10 different rural primary schools of North- Bengal area of Bangladesh (including both subject-based trained and untrained in English).	<i>Data Collection Tools:</i> Semi-structured Interviews – 50 interviews (one per teacher) to explore teachers' perceptions, instructional strategies, challenges, and support provided to students struggling in English reading. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) – 10 FGDs (one per school) with 4–6 teachers each to capture shared experiences, collaborative insights, and context-specific strategies. Classroom Observation – to observe teachers' instructional practices, engagement with students, and use of reading strategies.	Context- sensitive Interpretations and Descriptive Analysis (To observe and interpret the patterns of behavior, support, and instructional practices employed by teachers in response to students' difficulties in reading English within the rural primary school context). Perception: Refers to teachers' beliefs, understanding, or attitudes about students' reading difficulties. Practice/Support: Refers to the actual strategies, interventions, and actions teachers use in the classroom to help students overcome reading challenges.
3. What successful methods and materials are presently employed, and which ones should be implemented, to enhance English reading abilities in	50 teachers and 10 head-teachers from 10 different rural primary schools of North- Bengal area of Bangladesh	<i>Data Collection Tools:</i> Semi-structured Interviews 50 interviews with teachers (5 per school) to explore the strategies and resources they	Comparative Analysis (To explore the effective strategies and resources based on diverse classroom contexts and comparison among schools)

rural primary schools of North Bengal, Bangladesh?		currently use and their perceptions of effectiveness. 10 interviews with head teachers (1 per school) to understand school-level policies, support mechanisms, and resource allocation. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) 10 FGDs with teachers (1 per school, 4–6 participants each) to discuss classroom practices, resource use, and contextual challenges. Optional: 1 FGD with head teachers if group discussion adds insight into school-level strategy comparisons. Observations – Classroom observations to verify reported strategies and assess practical implementation.	It is feasible to have 5 English teachers per school if the school offers Grades 1–5 and each teacher handles a different grade level. This ensures representation across all primary grades
---	--	--	---

Strength, limitations, and ethical considerations of this study

This study provides detailed insights into the challenges of English reading proficiency in rural primary schools in North Bengal, Bangladesh, by exploring the experiences of students and teachers through classroom observations, interviews, and focus group discussions. Its strengths include offering context-specific, detailed data that reveal obstacles such as inadequate teacher training, traditional teaching approaches, and limited

exposure to English. However, its main limitation is that the findings, based on 10 schools, may not be applicable to all rural areas of Bangladesh, and the qualitative approach does not evaluate the effectiveness of any interventions. Ethical standards were strictly followed: participants gave informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were protected, and classroom observations were carried out in a respectful and non-disruptive way.

Importance and Implications of the Study

This research is important because it addresses a crucial yet underexplored topic: English reading skills in rural primary schools of North Bengal, Bangladesh. Students in this area encounter systemic challenges such as limited English exposure, economic difficulties, lack of adequate teaching materials, and poorly trained teachers. By capturing the real-life experiences of both students and teachers, the study offers a detailed insight into the obstacles hindering reading progress and highlights the particular difficulties learners face in a resource-poor, multilingual environment. The results have practical value for policymakers, educators, and curriculum designers by informing teacher training, encouraging participatory and activity-based teaching methods, guiding resource distribution, and boosting community and parental support for early reading. Furthermore, the research emphasizes the importance of aligning curriculum goals with actual classroom practices and learning conditions, providing evidence to enhance teaching quality and reading achievement. Beyond immediate classroom benefits, the study also sets the stage for future investigations into regional inequalities, long-term tracking of reading skills, and fair access to quality English education in rural Bangladesh, contributing to the wider aim of inclusive and effective primary education.

Findings

The study explored English reading proficiency among primary students in rural North Bengal, Bangladesh, focusing on students' struggles, teachers' perceptions, and classroom practices. Data were collected through classroom observations, interviews, and FGDs with 100 students, 50 teachers, and 10 head teachers from ten rural primary schools. The collected data were analyzed to meet the research questions where focused on exploring and understanding reading comprehension of a text by students from grade 1 – 5. It is found that English as a subject and reading this proficiently as a language seem to terrifying or obscure for the students of rural primary schools of North- Bengal area of Bangladesh. Unconducive domestic and financial environment of the students if that area is also affecting their psychological and learning status.

The collected data were analyzed to meet the research questions where focused on exploring and understanding reading comprehension of a text by students from grade 1 – 5. It is found that English as a subject and reading this proficiently as a language seem to terrifying or obscure for the students of rural primary schools of North- Bengal area of Bangladesh. Unconducive domestic and financial environment of the students if that area is also affecting their psychological and learning status. Teachers just arrange randomly baseline survey as per the direction of higher authority and categorize the students. But they do not arrange any preventive or healing method to sort those problems. The focus of the teachers in general is more on teaching about English rather than teaching in English. Students are deprived from modern facilities of learning in area. Teachers do not use any joyful teaching - learning method and how to make an English classroom as participatory and activity- based though they have subject- based training in English. Most of the

students have phonic problem. They do not make a good result in English. Head- teachers also do not negotiate with higher authority about prevailing problems of English language learning and lack of teaching- learning materials. By observing in the classrooms, the teachers are active speakers and learners are passive listeners. This scenario must be changed. Students are also suffering from weak verbal reasoning which means students do not understand and explain the contents of reading texts and this makes them difficult to remember and know the meaning of the texts properly. They do not even know the appropriate reading strategy. The students who have difficulties in understanding English texts are unable to remember the information and word they see in the texts. So, they have severe problem in processing information in any content. So, students also feel embarrassed, shy, stressed, anxious, preoccupied and distracted in their English classes and do not have high desire to improve their reading skills in English. Every student must be given sufficient attention from their parents and teachers to be able to improve learning achievements. Most students also stated that their parents pay less attention to their learning especially in English, let alone teachers. In this circumstance, students also feel less- supportive, sad and unmotivated.

Many students had minimal exposure to English outside the classroom. English is often perceived as an academic subject rather than communicative tool. Another critical barrier is unavailability of age- appropriate English reading materials beyond the textbooks in that area where this research has been conducted. This resource scarcity severely restricted students' opportunities to develop reading habits or engage with English texts beyond learning. Students feel like that as they do not make good results or read fluently, this means that they should take private or batch- based tuition, at this will solve their problems in English learning.

Proper monitoring and supervision are really absent in the schools and classrooms as well. There is a visible gap between curriculum expectations and classroom realities in rural Bangladesh. Teachers also complain that they do not get support from school authority. Lack of concentration in using and implementing effective methodology in the classrooms are directly liable to poor proficiency in English reading. Participation in training means having financial support for the teachers in rural areas. But the motto of training should be professional skill development. After the trainings, trainer and the authority should evaluate the teachers being present in their classrooms whether they are using the effective methodology, reinforcement strategies, teaching materials, accurate evaluation and assessment system, classroom management strategies or not. There should have the ELT (English language teaching), CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) provisions for BTPT (basic training for primary teachers) in PTI (Primary teachers' training institute). English is not a lecture- based method teaching. Teachers' guide is a very important instructional material in English. It should be revised and modified in primary grades. Teachers' guide in English subject will help to follow proper teaching- methods and techniques to conduct classroom activities perfectly as desired in the curriculum document. Teachers of the schools in rural area of North- Bengal also claimed that they could not able to follow the teachers' guide as the schools have unavailability of these. Teachers are also not aware of the aims, objectives of English curriculum in primary level. Lack of knowledge about curriculum is also responsible for poor facilitation in the classrooms and students' poor proficiency in English reading. Lesson- plan is the preparatory teaching- learning materials which facilitate teachers to conduct classes effectively. To implement the

objectives of English learning and preparing lesson plan is very indispensable. Lack of teachers in rural schools have made the class load to other teachers with poor performance in the classes especially in English. Teachers also complained that they have to conduct almost 5/6 classes in a day. A stimulating atmosphere for English language teaching can be created by displaying posters, charts, maps, dialogue boxes, matchings, timetables, signs and etc. vibrant activities together with students and teachers in the classroom. Matching pictures with the given sentences are considered as a good technique to support English language learners in primary level to develop vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. Using teaching aids in English classes should be enormous and also should be suitable and appropriate to the students needs. But it is a matter of great regret that most of the teachers of those schools use textbooks, chalk and duster. Teaching aids with activity and participatory based learning help to capture the English content knowledge easily and make a free English language learning for the students in primary level. Continuous assessment and giving feedback throughout the academic year and after the baseline surveys are fundamental factor. Multi- layer interventions should be provided in that area such as: English reading instruction techniques to strengthen the professional development of the teachers (phonics, scaffolding and comprehension strategies), create low- cost localized reading materials (English storybooks) to build a habit of reading among learners.

The main goal of English teaching at the primary level is that students will understand simple instructions in English, read them out and carry them out. Most of the teachers rarely make reading practice in the classrooms, rarely use English to communicate with their students in English classes. In fact, teachers also admitted that they rarely read any English newspaper, content, article or any book written in English. While teaching, they strive more on how far they can ensure the students can cut a good figure in the exams or get at least a pass mark in the exam. Teachers also should have the skill to build a rapport among different learners in the classroom. They also should make the lessons enthusiastic, interesting and describe the importance of English to the classroom. They have to improve their teaching qualities and build confidence in them and in the whole classroom. improve English subject-based teacher recruitment in primary schools should be preferred as prior issue which can enhance the English language learning at the primary level schools also in rural areas of Bangladesh.

The findings are organized here into three themes: student-related issues, teacher-related issues, and institutional/environmental challenges.

1. *Student-Related Issues:* Students exhibited significant difficulties in decoding words, reading fluently, and understanding texts, indicating low English reading proficiency. Many struggled with phonics, pronunciation, and verbal reasoning, affecting their comprehension. One student explained, "I can read the words, but I do not understand what they mean." Several students reported feeling anxious or embarrassed during reading activities: "When the teacher asks me to read aloud, I feel nervous and make mistakes." Minimal exposure to English outside the classroom, lack of reading materials, and limited practice contributed to these struggles. FGDs revealed recurring patterns of low motivation and reliance on rote memorization. Students also complained that teachers give them some suggestion- based content to study the night before English exams to learn those lessons by heart, reproduce them in the exams, just aiming at a pass mark or some grade in English. They do not even understand what they are reading, they have influence of their local language or mother tongue,

pronunciation problem in reading English, lack of interest, lack of practice and lack of motivation in studying English. One student mentioned, “Our teacher gives us some content to memorize the night before the English exam. We just have to repeat it to get a pass mark; we don’t really understand it.” Another student said, “We only study what the teacher tells us to memorize. We don’t get to read or practice English properly in class.” These findings align with bottom-up processing and schema theory, suggesting that insufficient decoding and comprehension skills hinder meaning construction from texts.

2. *Teacher-Related Issues:* Teachers predominantly relied on lecture-based and memorization-focused methods, with limited use of participatory or activity-based learning. One teacher noted, “I follow the textbook, but I do not fully understand how to make students comprehend the lessons.” Classroom observations confirmed that students were often passive listeners while teachers dominated instruction. Even when teachers had received subject-based English training, implementation in classrooms remained inconsistent. Teachers highlighted challenges in following the curriculum due to large class sizes and lack of appropriate teaching materials. These findings underscore the critical role of teacher capacity and instructional quality in supporting reading proficiency. During classroom observations, it was noted that teachers often conducted baseline surveys and categorized students according to performance, following directives from higher authorities. However, no follow-up remedial or supportive interventions were provided to address the students’ learning gaps. One teacher admitted in an interview, “We categorize the students as instructed, but we do not have time or guidance to provide extra support for those who are struggling.” From the students’ perspective, several reported similar experiences during FGDs. One grade 4 student mentioned, “Our teacher only tells us which group we are in, but they never help us to understand what we cannot read or learn.” These observations suggest that, in general, the instructional focus in these rural schools is on teaching about English (exam-oriented content) rather than teaching in English (practical language use and communicative skills). This interpretation is reinforced by classroom interactions where students mostly listened passively, and teachers rarely engaged learners in active reading or comprehension practices. By triangulating data from classroom observations, student FGDs, and teacher interviews, the study highlights a pattern where assessment and categorization occur without meaningful instructional support, limiting students’ opportunities to improve their English reading proficiency.
3. *Institutional and Environmental Challenges:* Structural and socio-economic factors further hindered reading proficiency. Large class sizes, insufficient teaching materials, and minimal school supervision were widely reported. One head teacher stated, “We do not have enough books or resources to support the students beyond the textbook.” Students noted that English was often treated purely as an academic subject, not as a language for communication: “We only read English to pass exams, but we never practice speaking it.” Low parental literacy, limited access to supplementary reading materials, and the absence of digital tools in rural households constrained students’ opportunities for practice, reinforcing the socio-cultural barriers to literacy development (Pretorius & Spaull, 2016; UNESCO, 2016).

Discussion

The results highlight a disconnect between the curriculum goals and the actual classroom experiences in rural primary schools. Students face challenges moving from basic skills to effective reading ability due to factors related to teaching methods, the learning environment, and socio-cultural influences. International research indicates that reading difficulties are not solely caused by poverty but also stem from mismatches in teaching approaches and language use (RTI International, 2011; Walter & Benson, 2012). Successful solutions include phonics-based teaching, interactive reading activities, and reading materials created locally. Professional development for teachers and the correct implementation of curriculum-aligned teaching strategies can help close the gap between educational policy and classroom practice. The study's reliability was strengthened by combining data from student interviews, teacher focus group discussions, and classroom observations, revealing consistent trends across these sources. Students' views shed light on psychological and motivational challenges, teachers highlighted instructional limitations, and head teachers offered perspectives on administration and resources. Together, these insights provide a thorough understanding of the difficulties in learning English reading and propose practical approaches to enhance proficiency in rural North Bengal.

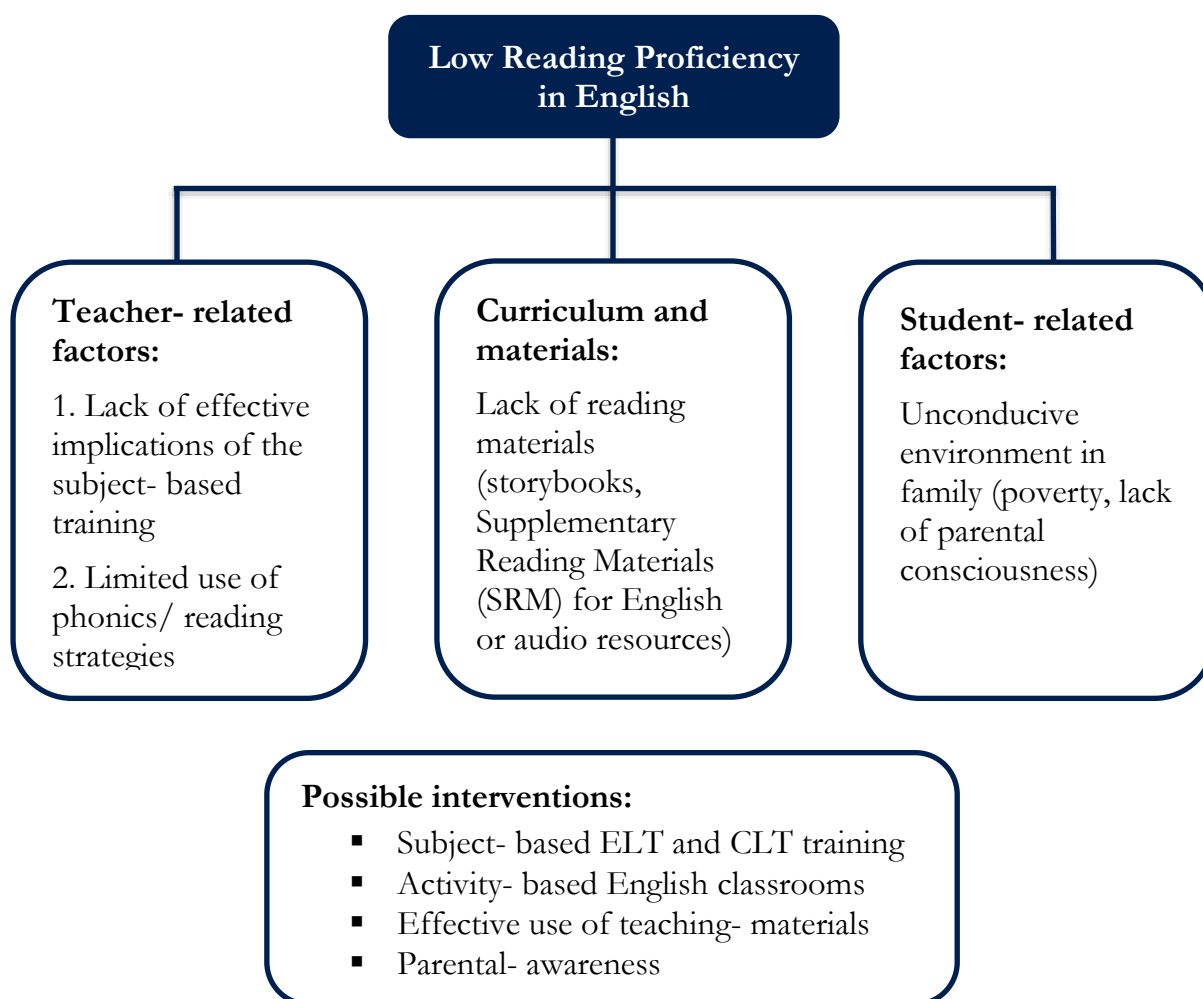


Diagram: Root cause analysis for reading difficulties in rural primary schools of North-Bengal Area of Bangladesh

Conclusion

This research investigated the difficulties in developing English reading skills among students in rural primary schools in the North-Bengal region of Bangladesh, focusing on challenges related to students as well as those connected to teachers and schools. The results show that students encounter several obstacles, such as limited exposure to English outside the classroom, poor phonological awareness, lack of sufficient practice, low motivation, and minimal support from parents. Students also mentioned that teachers often provide exam-related content the night before tests, expecting them to memorize it to pass rather than truly understand the material. Teachers themselves face structural and teaching-related challenges. Observations of classrooms showed that most teachers mainly used textbooks, chalk, and lecture-style teaching, seldom incorporating participatory or activity-based learning methods. Additionally, teachers were often unfamiliar with the goals of the English curriculum, effective teaching techniques, and age-appropriate materials, which hindered their ability to effectively support students' reading development. Initial assessments by teachers typically only categorized students without implementing interventions to address learning difficulties. Large class sizes, lack of teaching resources, and insufficient follow-up after training further limited effective teaching.

The study emphasizes that English reading proficiency is crucial not only for learning the language but also for broader academic success and communication. Enhancing students' reading abilities requires structured teaching approaches, including phonics instruction, training in comprehension strategies, and the development of affordable, locally relevant reading materials. A motivating classroom environment featuring posters, charts, activity-based learning, and participatory methods can aid vocabulary growth and reading comprehension. Teacher training should prioritize practical application, understanding of the curriculum, and fostering interactive, student-centered classrooms. Policy and practice recommendations include focused hiring of English teachers, updating teacher guides and lesson plans, better monitoring and supervision of classroom activities, and incorporating participatory learning techniques. Involving parents and creating print-rich home environments can also support early reading development. In summary, improving English reading skills in rural primary schools of North Bengal requires coordinated efforts in curriculum design, teacher training, classroom methods, and community engagement. This will help students develop functional reading abilities, build confidence in English, and access wider educational opportunities, promoting more equitable learning outcomes in rural Bangladesh.

How to cite this article

Sultana, N. (2025). *Voices unheard: Exploring English reading proficiency in rural primary schools of North Bengal, Bangladesh*. TESOL Bangladesh Journal, 2(2).
<https://doi.org/10.69907/tbj.v2i2.130>

References

- Abadzi, H. (2006). Efficient learning for the poor: Insights from the frontier of cognitive neuroscience. *World Bank Publications*.
- Baker, C. (2011). Foundations of bilingual education and bilingualism (5th ed.). *Multilingual Matters*.

- Banerji, R., Bhattacharjea, S., & Wadhwa, W. (2013). The Annual Status of Education Report (ASER). *Pratham*.
- Barrett, A. M., Ali, S., Clegg, J., Hinostroza, E. J., & Nickel, J. (2007). Initiatives to improve the quality of teaching and learning: A review of recent literature. *EdQual Working Paper*.
- Basu, A. (2017). Language policy and education in multilingual India: Critical issues and current trends. *International Journal of Multilingual Education*, 1(2), 1–12.
- Benson, C. (2005). The importance of mother tongue-based schooling for educational quality. *UNESCO*. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000141630>
- Bruner, J. S. (1983). *Child's talk: Learning to use language*. Oxford University Press.
- Cummins, J. (2000). Language, power and pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire. *Multilingual Matters*.
- Dubeck, M. M., Jukes, M. C. H., Brooker, S. J., Drake, T. L., & Inyega, H. N. (2012). Designing a program of teacher professional development to support beginning reading acquisition in Kenya. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32(5), 640–653. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2011.09.001>
- Gautam, C. (2017). English language teaching and teacher training in Nepal: A snapshot. *Indonesian Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 7(1), 170–178. <https://doi.org/10.17509/ijal.v7i1.6852>
- Gove, A., & Cvelich, P. (2011). Early reading: Igniting education for all. *RTI International*.
- Grabe, W., & Stoller, F. L. (2002). *Teaching and researching reading*. Longman.
- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words: Language, life, and work in communities and classrooms*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hornberger, N. H. (2009). Multilingual education policy and practice: Ten certainties (grounded in Indigenous experience). *Language Teaching*, 42(2), 197–211. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144480800550X>
- Lucas, T., Villegas, A. M., & Freedson-Gonzalez, M. (2008). Linguistically responsive teacher education: Preparing classroom teachers to teach English language learners. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 59(4), 361–373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487108322110>
- Nag, S., & Perfetti, C. A. (2014). Reading and writing: Insights from the alpha syllabaries of South and Southeast Asia. *Writing Systems Research*, 6(1), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17586801.2013.855633>
- Ouane, A., & Glanz, C. (2010). Why and how Africa should invest in African languages and multilingual education: An evidence- and practice-based policy advocacy brief. *UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning*.
- Piaget, J. (1952). The origins of intelligence in children (M. Cook, Trans.). *International Universities Press*. (Original work published 1936)
- Piper, B., Zuilkowski, S. S., Dubeck, M., Jepkemei, E., & King, S. (2018). Identifying the essential ingredients to literacy and numeracy improvement: Teacher professional development and coaching, student textbooks, and structured teachers' guides. *World Development*, 106, 324–336. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2018.01.018>
- Pretorius, E. J., & Spaul, N. (2016). Exploring relationships between oral reading fluency and reading comprehension among English second language readers in South Africa. *Reading and Writing*, 29(7), 1449–1471. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11145-016-9645-9>

- RTI International. (2011). Early grade reading assessment toolkit. RTI International. *RTI International*.
<https://www.eddataglobal.org/reading/index.cfm?fuseaction=pubDetail&ID=149>
- Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (1998). Preventing reading difficulties in young children. *National Academy Press*.
- Trudell, B. (2016). The impact of language policy and practice on children's learning: Evidence from Eastern and Southern Africa. *UNICEF Office of Research–Innocenti*.
<https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/845>
- UNESCO. (2016). If you don't understand, how can you learn? Global Education Monitoring Report. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000243713>
- UNICEF. (2019). Every child learns: UNICEF education strategy 2019–2030. *UNICEF*.
<https://www.unicef.org/reports/every-child-learns>
- Van Staden, S., & Zimmerman, L. (2017). Influences on reading literacy: A multilevel study using TIMSS and PIRLS 2011. *South African Journal of Education*, 37(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.15700/saje.v37n1a1268>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. *Harvard University Press*.
- Wagner, D. A. (2011). Smaller, quicker, cheaper: Improving learning assessments for developing countries. *International Review of Education*, 57(3–4), 199–222.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-011-9220-0>
- Walter, S., & Benson, C. (2012). Language policy and medium of instruction in formal education. In B. Spolsky (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of language policy* (pp. 278–300). Cambridge University Press.
- Westbrook, J., Durrani, N., Brown, R., Orr, D., Pryor, J., Boddy, J., & Salvi, F. (2013). Pedagogy, curriculum, teaching practices and teacher education in developing countries. *Education Rigorous Literature Review*. Department for International Development (DFID).
- Whitehurst, G. J., & Lonigan, C. J. (1998). Child development and emergent literacy. *Child Development*, 69(3), 848–872. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1998.tb06247.x>