

Strengths and Weaknesses of Teaching Fluent Reading: A Study at the Tertiary Level in Bangladesh

Mohammad Mustafizur Rahman*
Akhter Jahan*

Abstract: This paper explores the importance of developing fluent reading skill and tends to find out the strengths and weaknesses of its teaching at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. In order to give our students sufficient exposure to English, we have to solve the problems of learning and teaching fluent reading in English and find out effective ways of approaching this significant skill. With reference to research evidence, that we have studied both from the teachers' and students' point of view on the basis of a questionnaire survey, we now turn to the role of fluent reading in fostering learners' progress in reading skill as well as developing the other three major skills-listening, speaking and writing.

1. Introduction

Fluency is the ability to read quickly but accurately. Fluent readers recognize words and comprehend the meaning as they are read. Therefore 'reading fluency' refers to the rate of accurate reading where word recognition becomes relatively effortless almost automatic. This helps the reader to invest his/her attention to the meaning of what is being read which facilitates comprehension of text. Since the ultimate goal of reading is comprehension, reading fluency is receiving much attention. Therefore fluent readers should be able to:

- recognize words automatically
- read aloud effortlessly and with expression
- do not have to concentrate on decoding
- can focus on comprehension

Hughes (1989: 138) called this type of quick and efficient reading as expeditious reading and it involves the following operations:

Skimming: Reading quickly to get "gist" of a section. The person can-

- obtain main ideas and discourse topic quickly and efficiently;
- establish quickly the structure of a text;
- decide the relevance of a text(or a part a text) to their needs.

Search reading: The person can quickly find information on a predetermined topic.

* The Authors are Lecturers of English, Daffodil International University, Dhaka

Scanning: Reading quickly to locate specific information. The person can quickly find-

- specific words or phrases;
- figures, percentages;
- specific items in an index;
- Specific names in a bibliography or a set of references.

The three components of fluency are accuracy, rate and prosody. Fluency does not ensure comprehension, but comprehension is difficult without fluency. If a reader is constantly stopping to decode and figure out unknown words, most likely meaning will be disrupted and the process of reading becomes long and laborious. When students make gains in reading fluency, they are able to put their energies into comprehension to analyze, interpret, predict, and infer meaning from texts. Good reading comprehension rests on a foundation of fluent reading of words. Good readers rapidly recognize words without having to think about what the words are and they automatically activate the meaning of the words they are reading. They can then construct the meaning of sentences, paragraphs, and even larger units of text without undue effort. Fluent reading is an all-important language skill that is now in more demand than in any time in our history. With the exposure of the Internet in a global arena, students need to master reading in order to understand the vast knowledge of the fast spaced world. It has been said that the literate adult today is reading more in one week than their great-grandfather did in a whole year. This fact places pressures on the student to perform at a higher level of speed. The following are the utmost important roles played by fluent reading in learning a language:

1. According to Krashen, (1982) if we can provide learners with adequate exposure to the language, interesting material, and a relaxed tension-free learning environment, fluent reading will lead to language acquisition and will provide comprehensible input i.e the language which contains linguistic items that are slightly beyond the learners' present internalized grammar of the language.
2. It enhances learners' general language competence.
3. If students become fluent readers, they become interested in reading being motivated by their increasing fluency.
4. It increases students' knowledge of vocabulary.
5. Fluent reading is an effective means of fostering improvements in students' writing.
6. It motivates learners to read more.
7. Fluent reading offers the potential for reinforcing and recombining language learned in the classroom.

8. It helps to build confidence with extended texts. Kembo, J. (1993:36-38) points to the value of fluent reading in developing students' confidence and ability in facing longer texts.

There are many benefits in gaining a faster-fluent reading rate and Klaeser (1977:158) presents four positive points in this regard. The *first one* is the amount of time that a student will save when he/she is able to double the speed. With an increase in speed, the student will be able to cover more materials than at a slower speed. *Figure- A* illustrates the gain a student will make when his/her speed is increased Figure A

Timed Reading Rates	Slow Reader (150 words per minute)	Fair reader (250 words per minute)	Good Reader (350 words per minute)
1 Week	3/4 Book	1 1/4 Books	1 3/4 Books
1 Month	3 Books	5 Books	7 Books
1 Year	36 Books	60 Books	84 Books
10 Years	360 Books	600 Books	840 Books

Source: Klaeser, B. M. (1977:158).

These are important gains for the student that will promote academic success. The second advantage is that students are able to concentrate better which leads to greater comprehension. Thirdly, with the increase in potential speed and comprehension, academic grades tend to rise as well. Lastly and most importantly, students will enjoy the act of reading. With increased reading rate and motivation, students will encounter frequent and repeated vocabulary, which will transcend into other areas of language skills development.

Fluent reading involves the use of various strategies. Fluent reading does not mean reading *as-fast-as-you-can* over a passage and simply marking the gradual improvement. It involves various strategies such as *reading in broad phrases*, *skipping inessential words*, *guessing from context*, and *continuing to read* the text even when they encountered a term that they did not know (Wallace, C. 1992). Teachers need to select and facilitate the best methods of fluency instruction for their students and their classrooms. The following four components are needed for good fluency instruction.

1. Model fluent reading: Students need to hear and see what fluent reading looks like.
2. Use guided oral reading instruction: Students need assisted, guided oral reading instruction with a teacher, adult, or a peer.

3. Practice and Performance - Students need lots of practice to learn to read fluently. Performing helps students learn prosody.
4. Word Study - Students need to build their sight word knowledge in order to recognize words quickly when reading.

Instructional methods to improve reading fluency in Bangladeshi classrooms

Three instructional procedures are used when fluency is the goal of reading instruction.

- Rereading
- Paired Reading
- Using Decodable Texts

Rereading: It is a procedure which improves reading fluency. It requires the reader to read the same material again and again. Rereading is beneficial in the sense that it decreases reading time. But it is important to select a passage which is not too difficult for students to read.

Paired reading: Another method used for improving reading speed is called "paired reading" which we can easily use in our classrooms. In this approach, the student reads a passage along with a good reader, usually the teacher.

Use of Decodable Texts: The most important factor that slows down a student is his inability to decode words in a text quickly and easily. The teacher must be careful about using texts according to the ability of students' decoding level. Nevertheless, decodable texts improve the confidence of students and provide motivation for them to pursue the reading act further.

2. Purpose of the study

Teaching and learning fluent reading then seem to be a matter of great concern for both teachers and students at the tertiary level of Bangladesh. We tried to find out to what extent our teachers and students are concerned about the strengths and weaknesses of fluent reading on basis of two questionnaires; one for the teachers and the other for the students.

3. The study methods

The study participants: For the teachers' questionnaire, we selected thirty two university teachers from two public universities and eight private universities in Dhaka. They are- Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University, Daffodil International University, Stamford University, State University, Northern University, Darul Ihsan University, Northern University, Eastern University and University of Development Alternative (UODA).

For students' questionnaire, we selected one hundred and twenty students from the above mentioned universities. All the participants were selected randomly and they answered the questionnaire willingly.

The questionnaires: There were two questionnaires: one for the teachers and the other for the students. Both the questionnaires consisted of multiple choice questions and also some open ended questions for both groups of respondents. Both the questionnaires had some common and some different questions to compare and contrast the opinions of the two groups.

The questionnaire for teachers

In the teachers' questionnaire we asked for opinions on different aspects of teaching fluent reading skill in the language classes.

1. Reading skill at tertiary level

Our first question to the teachers was whether they have ever taught Reading skill to their students or not. 87.5% of the teachers responded positively, whereas 12.5% answered negatively.

Teachers' table: 1

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
Have you ever taught reading skill at tertiary level?	Yes	28	87.5%
	No	4	12.5%

2. Satisfaction with the teaching techniques and methods

We also asked for their opinions about their satisfaction with their teaching techniques and methods. Only 12.5% are strongly satisfied with their teaching method, 75% wrote it to be slightly satisfied and another 12.5% are dissatisfied with their teaching methods.

Teachers' table: 2

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
Are you satisfied with your teaching techniques and methods?	Strongly satisfied	4	12.5%
	Slightly satisfied	24	75%
	Dissatisfied	4	12.5%

3. Satisfaction with the students' quality

Our next question was about the level of their satisfaction with the students' quality. 75% ticked it to be medium and 25% wrote that they are not at all satisfied with the students' quality. But at the total satisfaction level, unfortunately, there was no percentage.

Teachers' table: 3

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
Are you satisfied with the students' quality?	Strongly satisfied	0	00%
	Slightly satisfied	24	75%
	Dissatisfied	8	25%

4. Better fluent readers

We also asked them who were better in fluent reading. We gave two options in this regard: a) Students from English medium background or b) Students from non-English medium background. All the respondents answered in favor of the students from English medium background.

Teachers' table: 4

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
Who are better in fluent reading?	Students' with English medium background.	32	100%
	Students' with Bengali medium background.	0	00%

So there is no doubt that students from English medium background are definitely better in fluent reading than the students with Bengali medium background.

5. Students' fluency before giving instruction in reading classes

We needed to know the level of students' fluency before the teachers' instructions in the classes. No teacher was satisfied with the students' reading fluency before his/her instructions. 50% students were categorized as slightly satisfied and other 50% as totally dissatisfied.

Teachers' table: 5

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
What was the level of students' fluency before your instructions?	Strongly satisfied	0	00%
	Slightly satisfied	16	50%
	Dissatisfied	16	50%

6. Level of students' fluency after following teachers' instructions

When we asked for the level of students' fluency after following the teachers' instructions, we got an expected result. 37.5% students were found to be strongly satisfied whereas 50% were slightly satisfied and only 12.5% were found to be dissatisfied.

Teachers' table: 6

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
What is the level of students' reading fluency after your instruction?	Strongly satisfied	12	37.5%
	Slightly satisfied	16	50%
	Dissatisfied	4	12.5%

7. Limitations in teaching fluent reading skill

At last we asked them about the limitations that they have found in teaching fluent reading skill. We asked them to tick more than one option if they found it necessary to identify. Lack of motivation got a good score here; again 87.5% had chosen 'mixed ability classes. Lack of students' interest got 62.5% responses from the respondents. But unexpectedly, lack of reading materials was identified not to be a problem for the teachers in teaching fluent reading. They also did not find any lack of teachers' training in this regard.

Teachers' table: 7

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
Limitation[s] you faced in teaching reading skill :	Lack of reading materials	0	00%
	Mixed ability class	28	87.5%
	Limitation of internet access	0	00%
	Lack of students' interest	20	62.5%
	Lack of teachers' training	0	00%
	Lack of motivation	32	100%

Students' questionnaire

We conducted a separate questionnaire on 120 students of tertiary level as mentioned earlier to compare their thoughts and opinions with their teachers'.

1. Learning reading skill at tertiary level

Our first question to students was about learning reading skill at the tertiary level. 100 % of the respondents marked 'Yes'.

Students' table: 1

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
Have you ever learnt reading skill at tertiary level?	Yes	120	100%
	No	00	00%

2. Satisfaction with the fluent reading classes

In the questionnaire, we also asked for their opinion about the reading classes. About 15% was strongly satisfied and 10% was not at all satisfied whereas 75% ticked it as slightly satisfied. This indicates that majority of the students were not satisfied with the standard of their reading classes.

Students' table: 2

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
Are you satisfied with your reading classes?	Strongly satisfied	18	15%
	Slightly satisfied	90	75%
	Dissatisfied	12	10%
	Not answered	00	00%

3. Satisfaction in reading fluency

Regarding students' satisfaction level, there was another question asking whether they are satisfied with their present reading fluency or not. In reply 7.5% of the respondents ticked 'satisfied' while 80% ticked slightly satisfied, 10% said 'dissatisfied' and the rest 2.5% did not answer the question. So we can assume that maximum students consider themselves as medium.

Students' table: 3

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
Are you satisfied with your reading fluency?	Strongly satisfied	9	7.5%
	Slightly satisfied	96	80%
	Dissatisfied	12	10%
	Not answered	3	2.5%

4. Students' satisfaction level before the reading classes

We also asked them about their previous level of reading fluency before attending the reading classes. 15% marked strongly satisfied but 45% ticked slightly satisfied and 40 % marked it as dissatisfied.

Students' table: 4

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
What was the level of your fluency before receiving instructions from your teacher in the reading classes?	Strongly satisfied	18	15%
	Slightly satisfied	54	45%
	Dissatisfied	48	40%
	Not answered	00	00%

5. Students' level after completing the reading course

In response to this question 20% identified their level of reading fluency to be highly satisfactory, and 77.5 % ticked it to be slightly satisfactory and only 2.5 % marked it to be dissatisfied. This percentage indicates that the teachers' instructions in the reading classes have played a very important role in improving their fluency of reading.

Students' table: 5

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
What is the level of fluency after completing the reading course?	Strongly satisfied	24	20%
	Slightly satisfied	93	77.5%
	Dissatisfied	03	2.5%

6. Time spent for reading purposes

At this point of our questionnaire, we needed to know how much time the students generally spend for their reading purposes everyday on an average. 47.5% marked that they used to spend one hour everyday for this purpose. On the other hand, 20% said 30 minutes, 5% said 40-45 minutes, 17.5% wrote two hours and 7.5% wrote three hours whereas 2.5% students did not answer this question.

Students' table: 6

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
How much time do you spend for reading purposes everyday?	30 minutes	24	20%
	40-45 minutes	06	5%
	1 hour	57	47.5%
	2 hours	21	17.5%
	3 hours	09	7.5%
	Not answered	03	2.5%

7. Reading extra textual books/magazines/newspapers

We also asked them whether they read extra textual books or magazines or newspapers. Positively 92.5% said that they read extra textual materials which help them a lot to improve their reading fluency.

Students' table: 7

Question	Choices	Scores	Percentage
Do you read extra textual books / magazines / newspapers?	Yes	111	92.5%
	No	6	5%
	Not answered	03	2.5%

8. Limitation faced by the students

Our main target was to know about the limitations that the students had faced in learning fluent reading skill. We asked them to tick more than one option if they found it necessary to identify. Unexpectedly, 55% students identified the mixed ability class as their main barrier in learning the skill perfectly. Forty five marked the lack of reading materials also as a limitation. Again, 17.5% found 'lack of internet accesses' and 'lack of teachers' training' were the limitations. But most prominently 55% marked that they were not interested enough to learn this skill. That's why, they have not improved much.

Students' table: 8

Intention to know about	Options	Scores	Percentage
The Limitation[s] faced by the Students in learning fluent reading skill.	Reading materials	54	45%
	Mixed ability class	66	55%
	Internet access	21	17.5%
	Lack of teachers' training	21	17.5%
	Lack of interest	66	55 %

4. Major findings of the study

1. The results of the survey show that both the teachers and the students are agreed on the point that fluent reading is very much important to develop one's language skill. At the same time they also admitted that the level of fluency in reading is not at all satisfactory among the students at the tertiary level in Bangladesh, but it can be improved with a well designed fluent reading course.
2. Students also showed a positive sign of reading extra textual materials everyday, but teacher thought that students did not spend adequate time in this regard. So students need to spend more time and read all kinds of reading materials.
3. The students with English medium background are found to be better in fluent reading than the students with Bengali medium background. Because of their long term practice they become better readers. So the students who belong to non-English medium background need much more practice to level themselves with them.
4. Regarding the limitations, mixed ability class was found to be the common barrier for both teachers and students. Lack of motivation got the first priority to the teachers. But to the students it was found not to be a problem. Again, lack of reading materials was not considered to be a barrier to teachers, whereas it got a huge support from the students.
5. Both teachers and students gave emphasis on enriching vocabulary and practicing correct pronunciation to be fluent in reading. They do feel the need of proper teachers' training in this consideration. We also have found the need of dividing the class into groups considering the level of students. Again, reading materials should also be selected according to the students' level of interest.
6. To the teachers, their main concern was the motivation of students. Lack of interest was a great problem to the teachers.

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Conclusion: This study provides evidence of the effectiveness of fluent reading in fostering learners' language development. Fluent reading programs can provide a platform for promoting learners' language development at the tertiary level, although they require a significant investment of time, energy and resources. All the students will be benefited from the fluent reading course as long as they have realistic goals, patience and practice in this skill. The research shows that though both the teachers and the students face some problems in the fluent reading classes, they unanimously believe that fluent reading skill is very much necessary to be a proficient language user. They think that most of the limitations can be solved if teachers and students interact with each other from time to time. With the mutual participation of everybody, it is very much possible to make an environment favorable enough to make the fluent reading classes interesting and effective.

Recommendations: Under the light of our study we have drawn out the following recommendations in teaching and learning fluent reading:

- ❖ Both the teachers and the students are concerned about the fact that language learning can not be done overnight. They think, if the interest of students could be raised then it would be easy for them to motivate the students in learning fluent reading skill to our intended level.
- ❖ Teachers have given stress on student-motivation. They argued that if students are motivated properly no skill is hard to learn, let alone fluent reading. Regular motivation plays a key role in developing students' reading fluency. This enables effective monitoring of individual progress and provides opportunities for the teachers to encourage students to read widely.
- ❖ As vocabulary and pronunciation are found to be the main weaknesses in learning fluent reading, so stress should be given to learning pronunciation and enriching vocabulary. Students should spend adequate time in learning vocabulary and pronunciation.
- ❖ Interesting materials should be used to motivate learners to build their reading habit. Material, selected for fluent reading programs, should address students' needs, tastes and interests to energize and motivate them to read the books. Along with the texts additional materials like newspapers, magazines, story books, poems, songs, speeches, etc. should be used as teaching materials.
- ❖ According to the proficiency level of the students the language classes should be divided into groups.
- ❖ Teachers should encourage the students to read as much as they can and also should motivate them to use dictionaries.
- ❖ Group work and pair work can make the learning process interesting to the learners in the classroom.
- ❖ Teachers should inspire students to read what they like to read.
- ❖ Students need to do practice in library and home.
- ❖ Students need to get authentic reading materials.
- ❖ Students should get proper guidelines from the teachers. Teachers should guide them time to time to make them fluent readers.
- ❖ Students need to spend time for reading extra-textual materials.
- ❖ The reading classes should be interactive so that the students can share their problems with their course teacher.

- ❖ Teachers should try to grow interest among the students. This is perhaps the most important aspect of our study to emphasize. Teachers need to invest time and energy in creating interest among the students by making use of multimedia resources. (e.g. video, audio, CD ROM, film, etc.). Teachers can grow students' interest by taking them out to enjoy plays based on books, leaflets, library resources, and even inviting visiting speakers. In these ways, teachers can motivate students to read and secure their full engagement in reading.
- ❖ Related institutions should provide more reading materials and facilities.
- ❖ Audio materials are also very popular and motivating with Bangladeshi students. It provides the learners with correct pronunciation giving exposure to different accents, speech rhythms and cadences.
- ❖ In order to run a fluent reading program successfully, effective monitoring is required to administer the resources efficiently. Teachers should always remind the students of the following techniques to develop their fluent reading skill:
 1. Stopping reading one word at a time, instead read the entire sentence or several words at a time to quickly improve the reading skill.
 2. Be an active reader. Look for ideas, rather than individual words.
 3. Avoid lingering or re-reading the text.
 4. Skimming material first, then read by paragraph

It is obvious that students who read more become better readers. This ideology intends to provide students with whatever they are interested to, and let them hone their reading skills on that content. If they find that reading is not difficult they may proceed to it further.

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