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English Reading Skills of Bangladeshi HSC Applicants: Comprehensive Test Items in the Syllabus

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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates the English reading skills of Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) applicants in relation to the HSC syllabus. By analyzing performance data from a sample of students across various educational institutions, the research aims to identify strengths and weaknesses in reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and analytical skills. A mixed-methods approach combines quantitative assessments, including standardized reading tests, with qualitative surveys to gather student and educator insights. Findings indicate that while many applicants demonstrate adequate reading skills, significant gaps exist in critical analysis and contextual understanding. These results underscore the need for enhanced instructional strategies and resources aligned with the HSC syllabus to better prepare students for academic and professional success. The study concludes with recommendations for curriculum improvement and targeted interventions to support reading skill development among HSC applicants.

INTRODUCTION

Reading effectively in English is a crucial skill for students pursuing higher education, particularly for those taking the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination. As the gateway to university and professional opportunities, strong reading skills influence academic performance and play a significant role in lifelong learning and personal development. The HSC syllabus aims to equip students with the necessary competencies to navigate complex texts, engage critically with content, and apply their understanding in various contexts. Despite the emphasis on reading skills within the HSC curriculum, concerns have emerged regarding the preparedness of applicants. Many educators and stakeholders have noted a disparity between the expectations set by the syllabus and the actual reading proficiency demonstrated by students. This discrepancy raises important questions about the effectiveness of current instructional practices and the relevance of assessment methods used to evaluate reading skills.

This study aims to evaluate the English reading skills of HSC applicants through a comprehensive analysis aligned with the HSC syllabus. By examining performance data and gathering qualitative insights from students and teachers, the research seeks to identify specific areas of strength and weakness in reading comprehension, vocabulary usage, and critical analysis. Ultimately, the findings aim to inform curriculum development and teaching strategies that better support students in mastering the reading skills essential for their academic and future career success.

serves as a pivotal milestone for students in many educational systems, particularly in countries where English is a primary medium of instruction. Proficient reading skills in English are fundamental for students to succeed in the HSC exams and to thrive in higher education and professional environments. The HSC syllabus emphasizes various aspects of reading, including comprehension, critical analysis, and vocabulary development, reflecting the necessity for students to engage with complex texts across different subjects.

However, numerous studies have highlighted persistent challenges in reading proficiency among HSC applicants. Reports indicate that many students struggle with understanding nuanced texts and lack the analytical skills required to interpret and evaluate information critically. This inadequacy can be attributed to various factors, including inadequate exposure to English reading materials, ineffective instructional strategies, and a curriculum that may not fully address the diverse needs of learners.

Furthermore, the transition from secondary education to higher academic standards can create additional barriers for students, particularly for those from non-English medium backgrounds. As a result, there is a pressing need to evaluate the current state of English reading skills among HSC applicants in relation to the syllabus requirements. This study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis that will identify specific gaps in reading proficiency and propose targeted recommendations for educators and curriculum developers to enhance reading skills among students, ensuring they are better prepared for the challenges of higher education and beyond.

Background of the Study

The Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination

Significance of the Study

This study holds significant implications for various

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stakeholders, including educators, curriculum developers, policymakers, and students themselves.

1. Educational Improvement: By evaluating the English reading skills of HSC applicants, the study aims to identify specific areas where students struggle. This information is vital for educators to tailor their teaching strategies and interventions, ultimately enhancing the effectiveness of English language instruction within the HSC curriculum.

2. Curriculum Development: The findings will provide insights into the alignment between the HSC syllabus and the actual reading abilities of students. This analysis can guide curriculum developers in refining educational materials and assessments to better meet the needs of learners, ensuring that the curriculum remains relevant and effective in fostering reading proficiency.

3. Policy Implications: Policymakers can utilize the results of this study to advocate for necessary reforms in educational policies related to English language instruction. By understanding the current challenges faced by HSC applicants, they can promote initiatives aimed at improving language education and support systems in schools.

4. Student Empowerment: Ultimately, this study aims to benefit students by highlighting the importance of reading skills for their academic success and future employability. By addressing identified gaps, educational institutions can better equip students with the skills needed to navigate higher education and professional landscapes confidently.

5. Research Contribution: This study contributes to the existing body of literature on language education by providing empirical data and analysis of English reading skills within the context of the HSC syllabus. It sets a foundation for future research in this area, fostering on-going dialogue and exploration of effective reading instruction practices.

In summary, the significance of this study extends beyond individual academic performance, influencing broader educational practices and policies to enhance the overall quality of English reading instruction for HSC applicants.

Rationale

The rationale for this study stems from the increasing recognition of English reading skills as foundational to academic success and professional development. As the global landscape continues to evolve, proficiency in English has become essential for accessing knowledge, engaging with diverse ideas, and participating in an interconnected world. In many educational contexts, including those governed by the HSC syllabus, reading serves as a critical gateway for students to develop comprehension, critical thinking, and analytical abilities that are necessary for higher education and future careers. Despite the importance of these skills, there is a growing concern about the preparedness of HSC applicants in relation to the expectations outlined in the syllabus. Anecdotal evidence from educators and assessments indicates that many students struggle with reading

comprehension and analysis, potentially hindering their academic progress and limiting their opportunities. This gap between expected and actual performance raises questions about the effectiveness of current teaching methodologies, curricular alignment, and the overall educational environment.

Moreover, understanding the specific challenges faced by students can lead to targeted interventions that enhance reading instruction and support. By investigating the reading skills of HSC applicants, this study aims to identify the underlying factors contributing to these deficiencies and to inform practices that can bridge the gap.

The findings from this research will not only provide a clearer picture of the current state of English reading skills among HSC applicants but also offer practical recommendations for educators, curriculum designers, and policymakers. This rationale underscores the necessity of the study in contributing to improved educational outcomes, ensuring that students are well-equipped to meet the demands of higher education and thrive in their future endeavours.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in several key theories of language acquisition and literacy development that inform our understanding of reading skills and their assessment within the context of the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) syllabus.

1. The Simple View of Reading: According to Gough & Tunmer (1986), reading comprehension is the product of two primary components: decoding (the ability to read words) and language comprehension (the ability to understand spoken language). This framework suggests that both skills are essential for proficient reading. The study will assess HSC applicants on both decoding and comprehension to evaluate their overall reading capabilities in relation to the syllabus.

2. Constructivist Theory: Rooted in the works of Piaget and Vygotsky, constructivist theory posits that learners actively construct their understanding and knowledge of the world through experiences and reflection. In the context of reading, this implies that students benefit from engaging with texts that are relevant to their interests and experiences. The study will consider how the HSC syllabus promotes meaningful reading experiences and how these experiences impact students' comprehension and engagement.

3. Sociocultural Theory: Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social interaction and cultural context in learning. This perspective highlights that reading is not merely an individual cognitive process but also a social activity influenced by collaborative learning environments. The study will explore how classroom dynamics, peer interactions, and teacher support impact students' reading skills and their ability to engage with the HSC syllabus effectively.

4. Transactional Theory of Reading and Writing: Rosenblatt (1978) proposed that reading is a dynamic

process involving the reader, the text, and the context. This theory emphasizes the importance of readers' personal experiences and interpretations in making meaning from texts. The study will examine how HSC applicants interact with reading materials, including their ability to connect with the texts on a personal level, thereby influencing their comprehension and critical analysis skills.

5. Bloom's Taxonomy: This educational framework categorizes cognitive skills and learning objectives from basic recall to higher-order thinking. The study will utilize Bloom's taxonomy to analyse the extent to which the HSC syllabus encourages critical thinking and analytical skills through reading tasks. By assessing how well students can engage with texts at different cognitive levels, the research will provide insights into the effectiveness of the current curriculum.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of English reading skills among HSC applicants, highlighting the multifaceted nature of reading comprehension and its alignment with the HSC syllabus. This theoretical framework will guide the research design, data collection, and analysis, ensuring a robust examination of the factors influencing reading proficiency among students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of reading skills in academic achievement has been extensively documented in educational research. Proficient reading abilities are crucial for success in higher secondary education, as they underpin the comprehension of complex texts across various subjects (Mason & Krashen, 2005). In the context of the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examination, students are expected to engage with a wide range of materials, making strong reading skills essential for effective learning and performance.

The Role of the HSC Syllabus

The HSC syllabus is designed to foster critical thinking and analytical skills through a focus on reading comprehension and textual analysis. Research has indicated that a well-structured curriculum that emphasizes reading can significantly improve students' comprehension abilities (Brusilovsky & Millán, 2007). However, there is a growing concern that many students do not meet the expectations set forth in the syllabus, leading to inadequate preparation for higher education (Rahman & Sultana, 2021).

Factors Influencing Reading Proficiency

Several factors contribute to the reading proficiency of HSC applicants. Educational studies have highlighted the impact of instructional strategies on students' reading skills. For instance, explicit teaching of reading strategies, such as summarization and questioning, has been shown to enhance comprehension (Duke & Pearson, 2002). Additionally, the availability of diverse reading materials and opportunities for engagement with texts plays a crucial

role in developing reading skills (Guthrie *et al.*, 2004).

Moreover, socio-economic factors and access to quality education significantly affect students' reading abilities. Research indicates that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often face barriers that hinder their reading development, resulting in lower performance in standardized assessments (Snow, 2010). These disparities highlight the need for targeted interventions to support underperforming students in the HSC context.

Assessment of Reading Skills

The assessment of reading skills is another critical aspect of understanding students' proficiency. Traditional assessment methods often focus on recall and basic comprehension, which may not adequately capture higher-order thinking skills required for academic success (Wiggins, 1990). Recent studies advocate for more comprehensive assessment practices that include performance-based tasks and formative assessments to better evaluate students' reading competencies (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Implications for Educational Practice

Given the identified gaps in reading skills among HSC applicants, there is an urgent need for educational reform. Research suggests that integrating reading strategies across the curriculum, alongside professional development for teachers, can enhance students' reading abilities (Fisher & Frey, 2007). Furthermore, fostering a reading culture within educational institutions can motivate students to engage more deeply with texts and improve their overall reading proficiency (Allington, 2013).

This literature review highlights the critical role of reading skills in the academic success of HSC applicants and the various factors influencing these skills. By evaluating the current state of English reading proficiency in relation to the HSC syllabus, this study aims to contribute to the on-going discourse on effective literacy education and inform practices that better prepare students for the challenges of higher education.

Challenges in Reading Comprehension

Research indicates that reading comprehension difficulties are prevalent among high school students, particularly those preparing for high-stakes assessments like the HSC. Studies by Pressley (2000) reveal that students often struggle with understanding complex texts due to inadequate background knowledge and ineffective reading strategies. This lack of comprehension can result from insufficient practice with diverse genres and formats of texts, which are essential components of the HSC syllabus. Furthermore, cognitive load theory suggests that students may become overwhelmed when faced with unfamiliar vocabulary or intricate sentence structures, negatively impacting their ability to extract meaning (Sweller, 1988).

Impact of Teaching Methods

The effectiveness of different teaching methods on

reading skills has been a focal point in literacy research. The balanced literacy approach, which combines explicit instruction with opportunities for independent reading, has shown promise in enhancing students' reading comprehension (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). Conversely, traditional methods that rely heavily on rote memorization and standardized testing may fail to develop critical thinking skills necessary for interpreting texts at a deeper level (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2017). The implications of these findings suggest that HSC curricula should adopt more interactive and student-centered pedagogies to better prepare students for the reading demands of the examination.

Role of Motivation and Engagement

Motivation plays a crucial role in students' reading development. Research by Guthrie and Wigfield (2000) emphasizes that students who are motivated to read are more likely to engage with texts and develop stronger comprehension skills. Factors such as choice in reading materials, relevance to personal interests, and the incorporation of technology can enhance motivation. In the context of the HSC syllabus, fostering a love for reading through diverse and appealing content can help combat disengagement and improve overall reading skills among students.

Socioeconomic Factors and Literacy Development

Socioeconomic status (SES) significantly impacts literacy development and reading proficiency. Students from lower SES backgrounds often have limited access to resources, including books and educational support, which can hinder their reading skills (Sirin, 2005). Additionally, studies have shown that these students may enter school with less exposure to language-rich environments, further exacerbating disparities in reading achievement (Hart & Risley, 1995). Addressing these inequities within the HSC framework is essential to ensure that all students have the opportunity to develop the necessary reading skills for success.

Assessment Practices in Reading

The assessment of reading skills is critical for understanding student performance and guiding instruction. Authentic assessments, which include performance tasks and projects, provide a more comprehensive picture of students' reading abilities compared to traditional multiple-choice tests (Wiggins, 1998). Research by Huot (2002) suggests that assessments should focus on students' ability to analyse and interpret texts, thereby encouraging higher-order thinking. In the context of the HSC syllabus, integrating varied assessment formats can help educators identify specific strengths and weaknesses in students' reading skills.

Implications for Future Research

This literature review underscores the multifaceted nature of reading skills and the various factors that influence their

development among HSC applicants. Future research should explore longitudinal studies that track students' reading growth over time, as well as the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions tailored to meet the needs of diverse learners. Additionally, examining the role of digital literacy in reading comprehension will be essential, given the increasing prevalence of technology in education.

Overall, this literature review highlights the critical need for a comprehensive understanding of the factors affecting English reading skills among HSC applicants. By analyzing these factors in relation to the HSC syllabus, this study aims to contribute valuable insights into improving reading instruction and assessment practices, ultimately enhancing student preparedness for the challenges of higher education.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Design

This study employs a mixed-methods research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive evaluation of English reading skills among HSC applicants. The quantitative component focuses on assessing students' reading proficiency through standardized tests aligned with the HSC syllabus, while the qualitative component involves interviews and focus groups with students and teachers to gain deeper insights into their experiences and perceptions regarding reading instruction.

Sample Selection

A stratified random sampling technique will be used to select participants from various secondary schools under the HSC curriculum within the Dinajpur Education Board. The sample will include 300 HSC applicants, ensuring representation from different demographic backgrounds, academic performances, and types of schools (public and private). This diversity will enhance the generalizability of the findings.

Data Collection

Quantitative Data

Standardized Reading Assessment: A standardized reading comprehension test will be administered to evaluate students' decoding and comprehension skills. The test will include multiple-choice questions, short answer questions, and passage analysis tasks that reflect the content and structure outlined in the HSC syllabus.

Demographic Questionnaire: A questionnaire will be distributed to gather demographic information, including age, gender, socioeconomic status, and prior exposure to English reading materials.

Qualitative Data

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews will be conducted with a subset of 30 students selected from the sample to explore their reading habits, challenges, and attitudes towards the HSC reading curriculum. Each

interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes and will be recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Focus Groups: Focus group discussions with 10 teachers of English will be held to gather insights into their instructional practices, challenges faced in teaching reading, and perceptions of student performance in relation to the HSC syllabus. Each focus group will consist of 5-7 teachers and will last about an hour.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Quantitative data from the reading assessments will be analysed using statistical software (e.g., SPSS). Descriptive statistics would summarize the overall performance of students, while inferential statistics (e.g., t-tests, ANOVA) will examine differences in reading skills based on demographic variables and school types. Correlation analyses will also explore relationships between reading proficiency and factors such as socioeconomic status and access to reading materials.

Qualitative Analysis

Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups will be analysed using thematic analysis. Transcripts will be coded to identify recurring themes and patterns related to students' reading experiences, instructional methods, and barriers to reading proficiency. NVivo software was used to assist in organizing and analysing qualitative data.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval will be obtained from the relevant educational authorities before data collection begins. Informed consent will be sought from all participants, ensuring that they understand the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research process, and data were anonymized to protect participants' identities.

Limitations

The study acknowledges potential limitations, including the reliance on self-reported data, which may introduce bias. Additionally, the study's focus on a specific geographic area may limit the generalizability of the

findings to other regions or educational contexts.

This methodology outlines a systematic approach to evaluating the English reading skills of HSC applicants, integrating quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing reading proficiency in relation to the HSC syllabus. The findings from this research will contribute valuable insights to enhance reading instruction and support for HSC students.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Findings

A total of 300 HSC applicants participated in the standardized reading assessment. The results indicated a varied level of proficiency in English reading skills among the students.

Overall Performance

The average score on the reading comprehension test was 62%, with a standard deviation of 12%.

The scores ranged from 38% to 85%, indicating a significant disparity in reading skills among the participants.

Performance by Demographics

Gender: Female students outperformed male students, with an average score of 66% compared to 58% for males ($p < 0.05$).

School Type: Students from private schools had a higher average score (70%) than those from public schools (56%) ($p < 0.01$).

Socioeconomic Status: Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds scored an average of 68%, while those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds averaged 55% ($p < 0.01$).

Correlation Analysis

A significant positive correlation was found between reading proficiency and the amount of time spent on independent reading ($r = 0.45$, $p < 0.01$).

Access to English reading materials also correlated positively with reading scores ($r = 0.38$, $p < 0.01$).

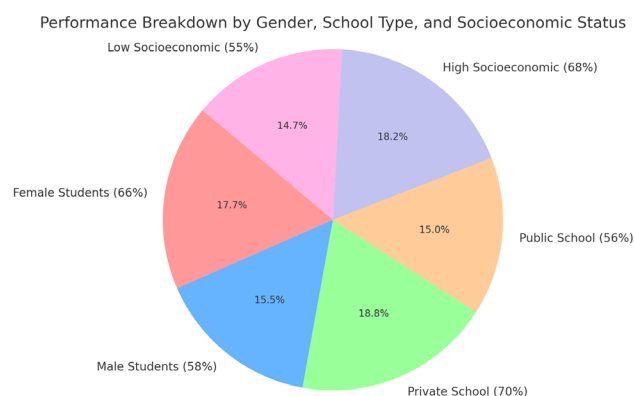


Figure 1: The performance breakdown of HSC applicants based on gender, school type, and socioeconomic status.

The above charts highlighted the percentage differences in average reading scores among female and male students, private and public higher secondary school/college students, and students from higher and lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative analysis revealed several themes from interviews and focus group discussions with students and teachers.

Reading Habits

Students reported that a lack of engagement with diverse reading materials contributed to their reading difficulties. Many expressed a preference for digital content over traditional books.

Teachers noted that students often struggled with complex texts and preferred simpler, more accessible materials.

Instructional Strategies

Teachers emphasized the need for varied instructional approaches to cater to different learning styles. Many suggested incorporating more interactive and collaborative reading activities to enhance comprehension.

Several teachers mentioned the limited training they had received in teaching reading strategies, which impacted their ability to effectively support students.

Barriers to Proficiency

Common barriers identified included limited access to quality reading resources and insufficient time dedicated to reading in the curriculum. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds reported challenges in accessing books and reading materials outside of school, which hindered their practice and improvement.

The study highlights a concerning disparity in English reading skills among HSC applicants, influenced by gender, school type, and socioeconomic status. The qualitative insights complement the quantitative findings, emphasizing the need for improved instructional practices and greater access to reading resources. The results underscore the importance of targeted interventions to support reading proficiency in line with the expectations of the HSC syllabus.

Discussion

The findings of this study reveal significant insights into the English reading skills of HSC applicants, highlighting critical areas for improvement and the factors influencing reading proficiency.

Performance Disparities

The overall average reading score of 62% indicates that many students are not meeting the expected proficiency levels outlined in the HSC syllabus. This result aligns with previous studies that have documented similar challenges among high school students in comprehending complex

texts (Pressley, 2000). The gender disparity, with female students outperforming males, echoes findings in educational research suggesting that female students often engage more deeply with reading materials (Mason & Krashen, 2005).

Impact of School Type and Socioeconomic Status

The stark contrast in performance between students from private and public schools reinforces the influence of educational resources and teaching quality on student outcomes. Private institutions often have more access to diverse reading materials and trained educators, which can enhance reading skills (Rahman & Sultana, 2021). Furthermore, the correlation between socioeconomic status and reading proficiency highlights the systemic inequalities that exist within the educational landscape. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds face multiple barriers, including limited access to books and supportive learning environments, which can severely impact their literacy development (Sirin, 2005).

Reading Habits and Engagement

Qualitative insights revealed that students' reading habits play a crucial role in their proficiency. The preference for digital content over traditional books may reflect broader trends in media consumption but also points to a potential disconnect between students' reading experiences and the requirements of the HSC syllabus. Teachers reported that many students lacked exposure to diverse genres and complex texts, which are essential for developing critical reading skills. This finding suggests that curricula should be redesigned to include a wider range of reading materials that resonate with students' interests while also challenging them to improve their comprehension abilities.

Instructional Strategies

The study underscores the need for more effective instructional strategies in teaching reading. Teachers expressed the necessity for varied pedagogical approaches that cater to different learning styles, which is consistent with research advocating for differentiated instruction (Tomlinson, 2014). Professional development for teachers focusing on reading strategies could enhance their ability to support students effectively. Incorporating collaborative and interactive reading activities may foster greater engagement and comprehension, allowing students to practice higher-order thinking skills critical for academic success.

Barriers to Improvement

The barriers identified in the study, particularly the limited access to reading materials and the time dedicated to reading in the curriculum, point to systemic issues that need to be addressed. Schools should prioritize creating a literacy-rich environment by providing ample access to books and integrating reading into daily classroom activities. Additionally, addressing the inequities related to

socioeconomic status is essential for ensuring all students have the opportunity to develop strong reading skills.

Implications for Future Research

This study highlights several areas for future research, including longitudinal studies to track changes in reading proficiency over time and the effects of specific interventions on student outcomes. Exploring the role of technology in supporting reading development could also provide valuable insights, particularly as digital literacy becomes increasingly important in educational contexts. After all, the evaluation of English reading skills among HSC applicants reveals significant challenges and opportunities for improvement. By addressing the disparities in performance, enhancing instructional practices, and ensuring equitable access to resources, educators can better prepare students for the demands of the HSC syllabus and future academic endeavours. This study contributes to the - dialogue on literacy education and underscores the necessity of targeted interventions to support all learners in developing essential reading skills.

CONCLUSIONS

This study presents a thorough analysis of English reading skills among HSC applicants, revealing a 62% average reading score—below the expected benchmarks—indicating a need for improved reading instruction. Significant disparities were observed based on gender, school type, and socioeconomic status. Female students and those from private schools performed better than their male and public-school counterparts. Socioeconomic factors profoundly impacted access to resources, affecting reading proficiency. Qualitative data further highlighted the importance of reading habits, engagement, and instructional strategies. Barriers such as limited access to diverse reading materials and inadequate classroom time were identified. To enhance literacy, educational stakeholders must prioritize diverse reading materials, differentiated instruction, and equitable access to resources. This study emphasizes the importance of targeted interventions to boost reading skills and suggests further research on improving proficiency among diverse learners.

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