Assessing the Reading Skills of Young Learners: An Exploratory Study Concerning the Regional Medium ESL Classrooms of Assam

Jushmi Gogoi

Abstract

Language skills are essential for an individual, as language is the primary means through which thoughts and ideas are expressed. Reading, writing, listening, and speaking are closely connected skills, and the development of one skill supports the growth of the others. Reading, in particular, plays a crucial role in language learning as it helps learners acquire vocabulary, understand sentence structures and use language accurately in both spoken and written forms. This study presents an exploratory survey conducted in regional medium ESL primary classrooms of Assam to assess the reading skills of young learners. The participants of the study include students from Classes 2 to 5, with a total of 103 learners involved in the assessment process. The evaluative tools used for the study are adapted from the 2023 Gunotsav evaluation framework for reading skills. The findings of the study provide a clear picture of the reading abilities of primary-level ESL learners and highlight areas where learners face difficulties. Based on these findings, the study also suggests a few innovative and practical measures to improve reading skills among young ESL learners. The study aims to contribute to more effective reading instruction and support better language learning outcomes in primary classrooms in Assam.

Keywords

Reading skills, young learners, ESL classroom, regional medium, language skills.

Introduction

Assessment is an important criterion through which one's competency is measured. Assessment of reading skills is considered inherently challenging in terms of the second language (Alderson et al., 2015, as cited in Brevik et al., 2016, p. 162). Researchers claim that reading skills are not only related to knowledge and exposure to the second language but also mostly depends on one's literacy and exposure to their first language (Koda, 2007, as cited in Alshammari, 2021, p. 55). Language skills and assessment are a very significant aspect of the teaching-learning process. Assessment enables teachers to measure the extent to which learners have understood the concepts discussed in the classroom. It functions as a form of feedback for teachers, helping them evaluate the effectiveness of their instructional practices. Through assessment, teachers can determine whether their teaching methods are appropriate to better meet learners' needs.

However, in terms of language skills, assessment plays a crucial role, and it is essential to explore what kind of assessment tools are available to measure different skills related to second language skills. When it comes to assessment, students seem to be assessed only in terms of writing skills in the schools of Assam through the summative assessment. Reading skills, along with the other two skills, are not given proper strategic attention in terms of assessment, and therefore, it seems that they remain underdeveloped. According to the ASER report 2023, "only 1 out of 4 children in Grade 5 in India can read simple English sentences." It states that about 25 per cent of the students in the age group 14-18 cannot even read Grade 2-level text in their regional language. About 42.7 per cent of students of the same age group cannot read English sentences. Only about 48.6 per cent of the 14-16 age group can read English sentences. This shows the current condition of reading skills in Assam (Kamrup, rural). Considering this situation, the article tries to highlight the assessment of reading skills from amongst the four skills of LSRW language skills in terms of English as a second language at the primary level classroom of Assam. Through an adapted framework of reading skills assessment from Gunotsav, 2023, the researcher tries to observe, record, collect data, analyse and interpret the data by using both qualitative and quantitative techniques.

Research Questions

To explore the state of ESL reading skills, the following research questions have been considered:

1. Are the primary-level learners competent in reading skills?
2. Can they pronounce words and sentences depending on their standard?
3. How can English reading skills be enhanced from the primary level in the ESL classrooms of Assam?

Research Objectives

The study has the following objectives:

1. To explore the reading skills of primary-level ESL Learners.
2. To analyse the oral skills in English at the primary level learners.
3. To see whether they can pronounce words and sentences properly.
4. To look out for measures to enhance reading skills in the English language.

Methodology

The researcher has used both primary and secondary sources with both quantitative and qualitative approaches used in this study. Random sampling method was used to collect data from the primary sources. Around 103 students of Classes 2-4 participated in the research process. It has used various secondary sources such as research articles, journal articles, books, newspapers, theses, etc. Microsoft Excel was used to categorise and interpret the data gathered.

Literature Review

Sari (2016) discusses the space that young learners should get while learning new skills, as they learn best when given their own space (Lawrence, 1998, as cited in Sari, 2016, p.14). The article aimed at sorting theories based on Montessori and other related experts to assess young learners. It discusses Montessori's argument that reading comes after speaking and listening, since in order to develop young learners' reading skills, the caregiver or nurturer helps them to develop their communication ability (Lawrence, 1998, as cited in Sari, 2016). Montessori focuses on the fact that young children can learn and retain information "simply by living". It depends a lot on the EYL teachers' teaching and contextualisation.

The study highlights how postmodernism has emphasised receptive language learning in terms of students' achievement, along with the score, because it believes that what matters is how the students are adapting themselves. Regarding EFL young learners' reading skills, classroom observation has shown that it was hard to impart a foreign language as they are taught through parroting and translations. The study highlights how it is important to put forward reading as an interesting skill by putting them in real-life situations, through face-to-face interactions, role-plays and games. The study highlights how there is no availability of a reading skill assessment instrument for EFL kindergarten students in Indonesia. The study also highlights how "underlining meaning is important in reading assessment" (Harrison & Salinger, 2002, as cited in Sari, 2016, p. 17). Alshammari (2021), in his research, investigates the prevalent practices of reading assessments of L2 in Saudi Arabia at the primary level. The research highlights many related studies which reflect the fact that L2 English reading skills fall below expectations (Al-Karroud, 2005; Alshammari & Ahmed, 2019; Alshammari, 2013 as cited in Alshammari, 2021, p. 55). The study highlights the plight of Saudi Arabian classrooms, where students only read to get through the exam, and they even memorise the reading tasks for exams. It highlighted the importance of having a valid tool for assessing reading skills and highlights how a good reader focuses on the meaning over certain hard or incomprehensible words (Alderson, 2000). The result of the study highlighted that most of the students did not focus on the skill, but rather they focused on the materials that would be included in the exam, and most of the learners were unaware of strategic reading. The studies included shows a significant gap in the assessment process in terms of the reading skills.

Results

To carry out the evaluation, the researcher has used a set of words or sentences from the Gunotsav[1] 2023 evaluation sheet as a standard evaluation sheet for reading skills to assess the primary level students. For each of the classes, i.e., from Class 2 to 5, some standard frames of words and sentences have been used to test the reading skills of the learners. The result of the evaluation is presented below.

The standard evaluation pattern is set as students who could pronounce all the frames correctly will get 3 out of 3; those who could pronounce

only 2 sentences will get 2, and those who would be able to only pronounce 1 will get 1 mark. Those who would not be able to pronounce any of the frames or sentences would get 0 marks.

Table 1: *Reading Skill Test Result: Class 2*

Number of students who participated: 22

Test Frames used for Class 2

Frame 1: Boy, Camp, Duster

Frame 2: Fog, Lamp, Yellow

Frame 3: Red, Horn, Sunday

Marks Obtained (Out of 3)	1	2	3
Number of Students	0	6	16

Figure 1: *Statistical Representation of the Reading Skill Test of Class 2*

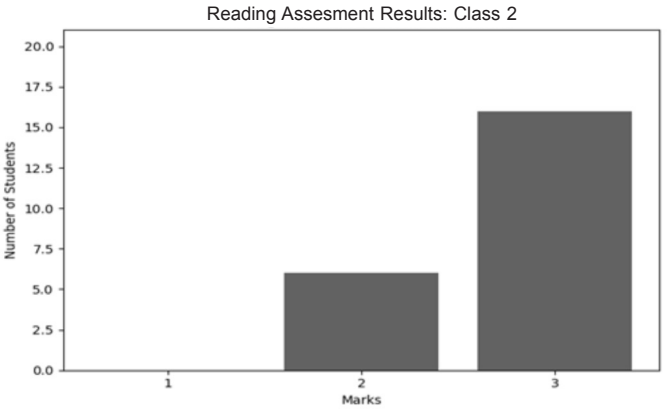


Figure 1 shows the number of students who could get 3/3 marks—i.e. those who pronounced all 3 sentences/frames correctly in English—is 16, which accounts for 72.73%. Six students could get 2/3 marks–i.e. pronounced 2 sentences/frames correctly in English which makes accounts for 27.27%, and there were no students who got 1/3 marks i.e. who pronounced only 1 sentence/frame correctly in English which accounts for % nil (0%). This indicates that students are capable of producing a significant amount of reading in Class 2, as 72.73%. of the students could pronounce the 3 frames properly.

Table 2: *Reading Skill Test Result: Class 3*

Number of students who participated: 29

Test frames used for Class 3

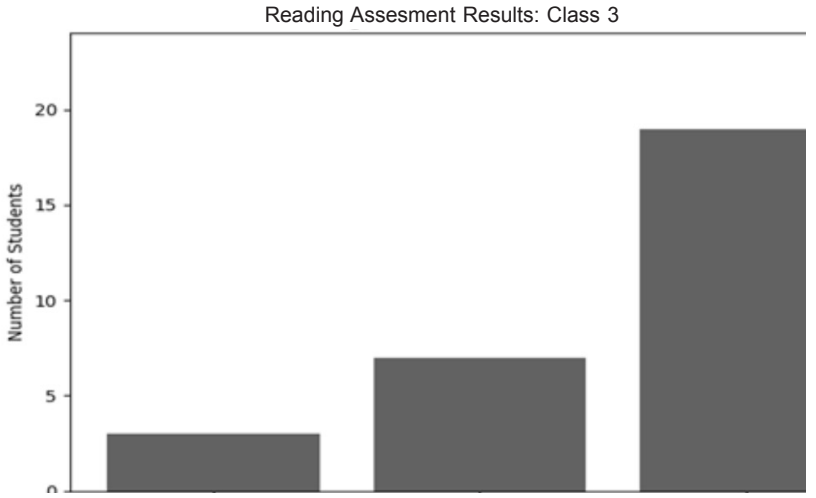
This book is on the table.

That is my bag.

I like to eat mango.

Marks Obtained (Out of 3 marks)	1	2	3
Number of Students	3	7	19

Figure 2: *Statistical Representation of the Reading Skill Test of Class 3*



The result of the reading evaluation represented in Figure 2 above shows that 19 out of 29 students could get 3/3 marks, i.e., they pronounced all 3 sentences correctly in English accounting for 65.52% in Class 3. Further, out of 29 students, only 7 students could get 2/3 marks which accounts for 24.14% while 3 students could get 1/3 marks; i.e. they pronounced only 1 sentence correctly in English which is 10.34%. There were no students who could not pronounce any sentence correctly in English which indicates 0%.

Table 3: *Reading Skill Test Result: Class 4*

Number of students who participated: 20

Frames of sentences:

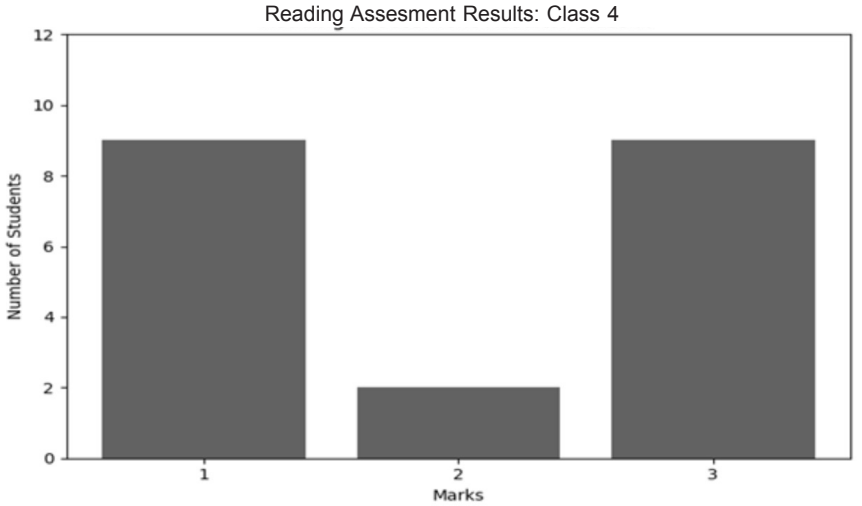
1. Lotus is my favourite flower. It is found in many colours like white, pink, blue, etc. A lotus flower grows in muddy water.

2. Five cows lived in a little forest. One day they fought with each other and separated. Later, a lion ate them one by one in a few days.

3. Mr. Boro is the favourite teacher for all the students. He is our only sports teacher. He always comes to school on time.

Marks Obtained (Out of 3)	1	2	3
Number of Students	9	2	9

Figure 3: *Statistical Representation of the Reading Skill Test of Class 4*



The result of the reading evaluation represented in Figure 3 above shows that the number of students who could get 3/3 marks—i.e., those who pronounced all 3 sentences correctly in English—is 9 for Class 4, which accounts for 45%. Students who could get 2/3 marks or who pronounced 2 sentences correctly in English is 2 (or 10%) while students who could get 1/3 marks or who pronounced only 1 sentence correctly in English is 9 (45%). There were no students who could not pronounce any sentence correctly in English which indicates 0%.

Table 4: *Reading Skill Test Result: Class 5*

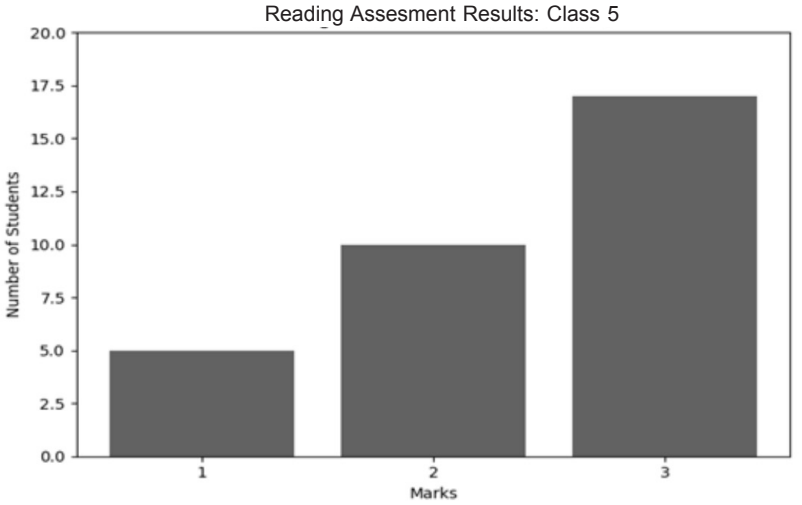
Number of students who participated: 32

Frames of Sentences

1. I am a grasshopper. I love to hop from place to place. I spend most of my time singing and dancing.
2. Mriganka is a very intelligent boy. He always comes to school neatly. All the teachers of the school love him immensely.
3. Dhemaji is a district of Assam. It is surrounded by beautiful hills. The people of this place are very kind and helpful.

Marks Obtained (Out of 3)	1	2	3
Number of Students	5	10	17

Figure 4: *Statistical Representation of the Reading Skill Test of Class 5*



The result of the Class 5 reading skill test indicates that 17 students could get 3/3 marks, that is, they pronounced all three 3 sentences correctly in English, which accounts for 53.13%. Out of 32 students, 10 students (31.25%) could get 2/3 marks by pronouncing 2 sentences correctly in English, while 5 students could get 1/3 marks, that is, they pronounced only 1 sentence correctly in English, which makes 15.6%. There were no students who could not pronounce any sentence correctly in English, which indicates 0%.

Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusion

Results of the study indicated that even though some students could pronounce certain words and sentences, children are not aware of strategic reading, and there is a lack of proper assessment practices in primary classrooms. There is a lack of conscious efforts both from the teachers, parents and students and they are not aware that these skills need to be improved. There is no exposure to speaking skills as such inside and outside the classroom and no proper listening practices. Students are mainly trained to read aloud and undertake a passive listening practice of the prescribed syllabus. In terms of writing skills, they are able to write the question-answered prescribed but not on a sudden or unseen topic. Comprehension and understanding needs to be strengthened amongst the preparatory level learners of English by integrating MT, or using resources from their MT for better relatability. Classroom observation and interaction with students revealed that children are not made conscious of the different sounds and meanings related to reading. The result of the present study suggests that certain students still fail to articulate words and sentences at their elementary level, showing the plight of Indian government classrooms. Language should be taught as a skill in all classrooms by appointing specific language teachers who can make them aware from the foundational level itself. They should be trained in soft skills in both L1 and L2 through different playful and creative activities without making language learning burdensome. In order to enhance the better reading skills, they must be trained in intonation, pitch and sound but due to the lack of language specific teachers in English and unfamiliarity with the alien sounds of English, it becomes difficult for Assamese medium students to pronounce words and sentences. They are also unable to understand the meaning of the sentences; therefore, an integrated approach of mother tongue and English should be carried out for better comprehension. Without comprehension, the learners will not be able to contextualise and build a bridge between language and meaning along with the socio-cultural knowledge. Students must learn and decode all the necessary micro skills such as vocabulary learning, grammatical structural awareness and should infer sentence-level meaning. They should be able to cognitively process the meaning-making process in order to understand the main idea. In today's milieu, it would be really difficult to cope if the student does not possess efficient language skills.

To make them articulate and develop their pronunciation and reading ability, teachers can adopt various activities such as role-play. They can also use the script of a drama and act it out in the classroom; use poem recitation as a reading activity, and can also use different games. Outdoor tasks, such as a collection of sentences found in signboards in their locality, can be assigned and students can be asked to present these in a pair-work activity. Language teachers should promote independent reading practices as catalysts. Further, they can use ICT to teach reading along with helping them to be active listeners, as only by listening to sounds and pronunciation properly would students be able to be good readers. Assessment in reading as well as other skills such as listening and speaking are found to be limited in the ESL context. Assessments are only centred on the writing skills and that too with an inclination on the root-memorisation with over-reliance on multiple choice-based questions. It mainly measures memory rather than comprehension. A proper assessment in all the skills of English is required in the primary level classrooms for better comprehension and performance in the English language by the ESL learners.

Limitation of the Study

The study is limited in terms of sample size which is taken from the similar socio-linguistic background. The sample population are from the same block, i.e., Kakopather Educational block who have homogeneous MT. As they are from the rural context, they may not adequately represent the diverse proficiency levels, and diverse backgrounds across regions. The assessment primarily focused on the researcher's interpretation, and therefore, there may be the possibility of subjective interpretation.

Notes

1. Gunotsav Assam is an initiative of the Government of Assam in Elementary Education and Secondary School Education launched in 2009 as an accountability framework for assessing school quality. Gunotsav, in essence, means "celebrating quality".

References

Alderson, C. (2000). *Assessing reading*. Cambridge University Press.

Alderson, C., Haapakangas, E. L., Huhta, A., Nieminen, L., & Ullakonoja, R. (2015). *The diagnosis of reading in a second or foreign language.* Taylor & Francis.

Al-Karroud, I. (2005). New, interesting methods and techniques: English as it should be taught. *Al-Ma'rifah Journal*, *1*, 120.

Alshammari, H. A. (2013). Effects of time constraint on second language reading comprehension (Master's thesis, Southern Illinois University). https://opensiuc.lib.siu. edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2082&context=theses

Alshammari, H. A. (2021). Assessing the reading skills of the Saudi elementary stage EFL learners. *Advances in Language and Literary Studies*, *12*(1), 55. https://doi.org/10.7575/aiac.alls.v.12n.1. p. 55

Alshammari, H., & Ahmed, E.A. (2019). Using an English novel to improve Saudi EFL reading skills. *Education and Linguistics Research, 5*(2), 33–40. http://10.5296/ elr.v5i2.14710

ASER (2022). *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2022*. https://asercentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/aserreport2022-1.pdf. (Accessed 20 September, 2024)

ASER (2022). *National Findings.* https://img.asercentre.org/docs/ASER% 2020 22%20report%20pdfs/All%20India%20documents/aser2022nationalfindings.pdf. (Accessed 20 September 2024)

ASER (2023). *ASER 2023 Beyond Basics.* https://asercentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ASER-2023_Main-findings-1.pdf. (Accessed 20 September, 2024)

ASER. (2023) *Annual Status of Education Report (Rural) 2023 Beyond Basics.* https://asercentre.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ASER-2023-Report-1.pdf.

Brevik, L. M., Olsen, R. V., & Hellekjær, G. O. (2016). The complexity of second language reading: Investigating the L1-L2 relationship. Reading in a Foreign Language.

Harrison, C., & Salinger, T. (2002). *Assessing reading 1: Theory and practices, international perspective on reading assessment*. Routledge.

Koda, K. (2005). *Insights into second language reading*. Cambridge University Press.

Koda, K. (2007). Reading and linguistic learning: Cross-linguistic constraints on second language reading development. *Language Learning*, *57*, 1–44.

Lawrence, L. (1998). *Montessori read and write: A parent's guide to literacy for children*. Three Rivers Press.

Sari, Y. A. (2016). Assessing EFL young learners' reading skills. *The English Journal*, *18*(1), 14–23. http://ejournal.uika-bogor.ac.id/index.php/ENGLISH/article/view/236/232

Jushmi Gogoi *is Assistant Professor, Department of English, PNGB Government Model College, Kakopather, Tinsukia, Assam and Research Scholar, Department of ELT, Gauhati University.*

jushmigogoi15@gmail.com