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Analysing Reading-Focused Activities in a Grade VIII English Textbook: Evidence from Government Schools in Assam

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ABSTRACT

Textbooks serve as primary instructional resources in contexts with limited teaching materials and play a central role in achieving curriculum goals (Li & Wang, 2024; Stara et al., 2017). Given this central role, the design and quality of literacy activities included in a textbook become crucial for supporting learners' literacy development. This study examines reading-focused activities in the Grade VIII SCERT English textbook used in government schools in Assam, evaluating how effectively they promote essential reading skills aligned with the NCERT Learning Outcomes (2017). The analysis focuses on three key skills: fluent reading, reading for vocabulary development, and reading for comprehension of main ideas and specific information. A researcher-developed and expert-evaluated checklist (S-CVI/Ave = 1.00) was used for systematic analysis. Findings reveal strong representation of comprehension-focused activities, while activities supporting fluency and vocabulary appear comparatively limited, indicating the need for a more balanced distribution of activities to foster holistic reading development.

KEYWORDS: English textbook analysis; Middle-stage schools; Reading activities checklist

INTRODUCTION

A textbook is more than a collection of content or activities; it reflects the pedagogical orientation and educational priorities of a curriculum (Richards, 2001). In the Indian school context, textbooks prescribed by national and state bodies such as the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) and the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT) play a central role in shaping classroom instruction, assessment practices, and pedagogical expectations (NCERT, 2017; NEP, 2020). This role is particularly significant in government schools and in rural or low-resource settings, where teachers often depend heavily on textbooks for lesson planning and learners have limited access to supplementary materials.

For most learners, English functions as a second or additional language, especially in states like Assam, where Assamese and various indigenous languages are more commonly used in everyday life. National reports on foundational literacy continue to highlight serious challenges in reading proficiency, with rural learners showing consistently lower outcomes. For example, recent surveys indicate that only a small proportion of students can read simple English texts fluently, and fewer than half of Class VIII students demonstrate adequate sentence-level comprehension (ASER, 2022).

The National Curriculum Framework for School Education (NCFSE) 2023 and NCERT Learning Outcomes (2017) for the middle stage emphasise reading as a core skill to be developed systematically through meaningful engagement with texts. Within this policy context, the present study examines how the selected SCERT English textbook of Assam supports the development of key reading abilities, focusing on fluent reading, reading for vocabulary development, and reading for main ideas and specific information. Thus, the primary question this study attempts to address is: To what extent are the three core reading skills – fluent reading, reading for vocabulary building and reading for main ideas and specific information – represented in the Grade VIII English textbook used in government schools of Assam?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Reading fluency, encompassing accuracy, speed, and expression, is a foundational component of literacy (Rasinski, 2004). The National Reading Panel (2000) identifies fluency as a central pillar of reading

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instruction, particularly emphasising guided oral reading for improving accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Research further shows that oral reading enhances learners' confidence and engagement with texts (Rasinski, 2014). Repeated reading is among the most effective strategies for developing fluency, as it improves reading rate, accuracy, and comprehension through repeated exposure to text (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; Rasinski, 2014). Samuel's theory of repeated reading (1979; 1997) explains that familiarity with text reduces cognitive load, enabling more efficient word recognition and improved comprehension.

In addition to repeated reading, structured oral reading practices such as timed reading and teacher modelling contribute significantly to fluency development (Hudson et al., 2005). Teacher modelling demonstrates appropriate pacing, pronunciation, and expression, while providing linguistic and affective support to learners (Okkinga et al., 2018). These practices align with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of scaffolding, which highlights the role of guided support in extending learners' reading abilities.

Vocabulary development is closely linked to reading proficiency, particularly in ESL/EFL contexts. Introducing unfamiliar words before reading supports comprehension and facilitates engagement with texts (Nation, 2013). Schema Theory suggests that linking new vocabulary to prior knowledge enhances retention and understanding (Anderson & Pearson, 1984). Research indicates that deeper lexical learning occurs when learners actively use new words in meaningful contexts rather than relying on passive recognition (Graves, 2016; Webb, 2020).

Reading comprehension is an active process involving inference, integration, and monitoring of meaning (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). Instruction that incorporates strategies such as predicting, questioning, summarising, and inferencing improves learners' ability to construct meaning (Oakhill et al., 2019). Barrett's Taxonomy provides a framework for addressing comprehension at multiple levels, from literal understanding to evaluative and critical thinking (Barrett, 1968; Day & Park, 2005).

In ESL/EFL classrooms, textbooks function as the primary medium for reading instruction and strategy development (Tomlinson, 2012; McGrath, 2016). Collaborative activities further support comprehension by enabling peer interaction and shared meaning-making (Dobao, 2014). Therefore, the design of textbook-based reading activities plays a crucial role in supporting learners' fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Using a descriptive research framework, the study employed directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) to investigate the degree to which the Grade VIII SCERT English textbook incorporates activities targeting reading fluency, vocabulary development, and identifying main ideas and specific information.

Data

The data for this study were collected from the English textbook, namely *Sunbeam English Reader III (2021 edition)* published by the State Council of Educational Research and Training (SCERT), Assam and is currently being used for Grade VIII. The textbook consists of six prose lessons and two poems, all of which were included in the analysis. Reading-related materials appearing before, during, and after each text were examined. Using the coding procedure described below, a total of 129 coding occurrences were identified across the textbook. These coding occurrences represented reading-focused instructions, exercises, and individual comprehension questions related to fluent reading, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension. The selection of these skills was guided by the concept of "reading to learn" (Richards, 2015) and the national reading learning outcomes prescribed for middle-stage learners (NCERT, 2017). Materials outside the core lessons – Preface, Teacher Notes and End-of-book sections – were excluded from the analysis as they do not constitute direct student-facing learning activities.

Coding Checklist and Content Validation

Drawing on selected theoretical perspectives on reading fluency, vocabulary development, and comprehension, the present study adopts these constructs as an analytical framework for checklist development. The checklist was created through a systematic, theory-informed process, synthesising literature on reading instruction, assessment, and textbook evaluation. Items on fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension were guided by research on oral reading, lexical processing, inferencing, and multi-level comprehension, including Barrett's taxonomy.

The initial draft of the researcher-developed coding checklist was reviewed by two professors of English Language Teaching. They evaluated each checklist item for relevance using a four-point rating scale (1 =

not relevant, 2 = somewhat relevant, 3 = quite relevant, and 4 = highly relevant). Ratings of 3 and 4 were considered relevant for calculating the Item-level Content Validity Index (I-CVI), while the Scale-level Content Validity Index based on the average method (S-CVI/Ave) was computed as the mean of the I-CVI values. In addition to the quantitative ratings, the experts provided qualitative feedback on the clarity and coverage of the checklist, which informed minor revisions before the checklist was finalised. The checklist (Table 1) demonstrated excellent content validity (S-CVI/Ave = 1.00), exceeding the recommended threshold for two expert reviewers (Davis, 1992; Yusoff, 2019).

Table 1. Content validity of the researcher-developed textbook coding checklist

	Checklist items	Expert 1	Expert 2	I-CVI
Fluent Reading	The textbook includes oral reading activities.	4	3	1.00
	There are repeated reading activities that allow learners to practice reading the same text multiple times.	3	4	1.00
	There are scaffolded pre-reading activities that involve pronunciation or oral practice of words or phrases before reading the text.	4	3	1.00
	The textbook provides timed reading activities to build reading speed and accuracy.	4	4	1.00
	There are guidelines for teachers to demonstrate/model reading fluently during lessons or in activities.	4	4	1.00
Reading for Vocabulary Building	New words are introduced at the beginning before learners encounter them in a text.	4	4	1.00
	There are opportunities for learners to use new vocabulary in extended contexts. (e.g. new sentence formation using the introduced words).	4	3	1.00
	The vocabulary exercises are varied (e.g., match the columns, using words in various contexts, synonyms & antonyms).	4	3	1.00
	There are collaborative activities (group/pair work) where learners can discuss and learn new words together.	4	4	1.00
	The textbook includes formative assessments, such as quizzes or other such activities, that evaluate learners' understanding of vocabulary.	4	3	1.00
Reading for Main Ideas and Specific Information	The textbook provides activities that prompt learners to identify the main idea of a text.	4	4	1.00
	There are activities that ask learners to locate specific information or details within a text (e.g., scanning tasks).	4	4	1.00
	There are comprehension questions that require learners to find information from the text using literal comprehension.	4	4	1.00
	There are comprehension questions that require learners to find information from the text using higher-level comprehension.	3	3	1.00
	The activities encourage learners to summarise or paraphrase the main ideas of the text.	4	4	1.00
	The reading activities provide opportunities for peer discussions or group work that allow learners to discuss main ideas and specific information from the texts.	4	4	1.00
S-CVI/Ave				1.00

Coding Procedure

The researcher independently coded all reading-related units across the six prose lessons and two poems using the validated coding checklist. The unit of analysis was a coding occurrence, defined as any reading-related activity, instruction, or individual comprehension question corresponding to one or more checklist categories. Activities focusing exclusively on writing, listening, or speaking were excluded from the analysis. Where a single activity addressed multiple reading constructs (e.g., oral reading, collaborative discussion, and comprehension), each construct was coded separately. Following the initial coding, the researcher conducted a second review of the coded textbook after an interval of one month to verify category assignments, confirm frequency counts, and ensure consistency in the application of the coding criteria before finalising the dataset.

FINDINGS

The evaluation of the Grade VIII English textbook with respect to reading-focused activities related to the three targeted reading skills revealed that the textbook includes a variety of activities aimed at improving all three skills. However, the distribution of activities across the skill areas is uneven. The following sections present a detailed analysis of each reading skill.

Fluent Reading

The textbook contains 25 activities in total designed to enhance fluent reading, including oral reading and repeated reading exercises, as illustrated in Figure 1.

Among the identified activities, 12 oral reading tasks explicitly instruct learners to read aloud words, sentences, or passages. Examples such as "Read aloud the sentences that contain the word…", "Say the words in the box aloud. Did you notice that they all have the sound ch?", and "First practise the pronunciation of the given word pairs and then recite the poem correctly" encourage attention to pronunciation and intonation. In addition, 9 repeated reading activities require learners to revisit texts, supporting familiarity with language structures and contributing to fluency development. Activities such as "Read the lesson again and complete the flowchart to show the chain of events…" and "Read the lesson carefully once again. Working with your partner, use the information…" prompt re-engagement with previously read material and reinforce comprehension. While these tasks target an ultimate comprehension goal, their operational mechanism utilises Samuels' (1979) repeated reading framework, which lowers cognitive processing load and fosters structural automaticity and reading rate.

Furthermore, 4 activities include teacher-led modelling of fluent reading, as indicated in instructions like "Your teacher will read aloud a passage…", "Practice saying these sentences after your teacher", and "Demonstrate how to pronounce the sound correctly…". These tasks provide learners with models of accurate and expressive reading. However, the textbook lacks scaffolded fluency activities and timed reading practices, which could offer structured support for developing reading speed, accuracy, and overall fluency.

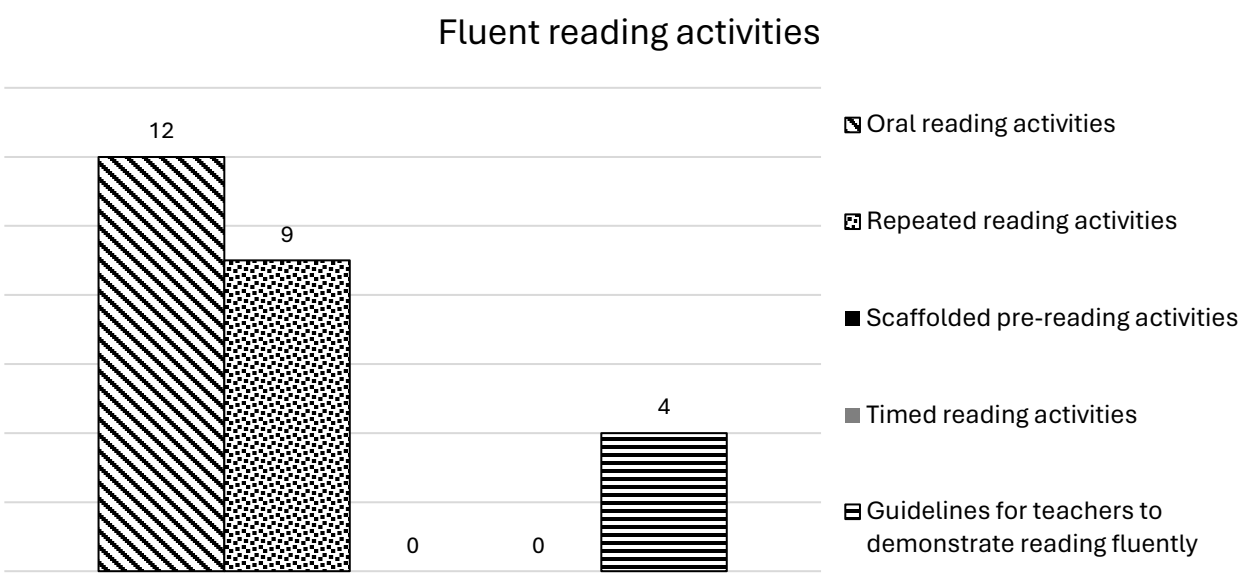


Figure 1. Distribution of activities related to Fluent Reading

Reading for Vocabulary Building

The textbook includes a range of activities aimed at vocabulary development. Four activities explicitly focus on introducing new words, such as "Find other words from the lesson which have similar 'ch' sound...Add a few more and practice saying them..." and "Note down all the words related to disease after reading the lesson carefully". These tasks support initial exposure, practice, and retention of new vocabulary. There are also 8 activities that provide opportunities to use new vocabulary in extended contexts, such as "Refer to a dictionary or your text and give two examples of adjectives...Now, use some of these adjectives in your own sentences."

To deepen word comprehension, the textbook incorporates 14 instances of varied vocabulary exercises. Activities such as "The following jumbled words are drawn from the poem. Identify and list their antonyms...", "Match the words in column A with their meanings in column B", and "Find out the meanings of the words in italics and select the correct answers" encourage learners to engage with vocabulary in varied and meaningful ways.

The textbook includes 4 collaborative activities involving pair or group work, for example, "Now think of a few words to describe...working with a partner...paste around the picture all the words", which promote interaction and shared learning. However, the textbook lacks activities that explicitly focus on evaluating learners' understanding of vocabulary. A graphical overview of the vocabulary activities is presented in Figure 2.

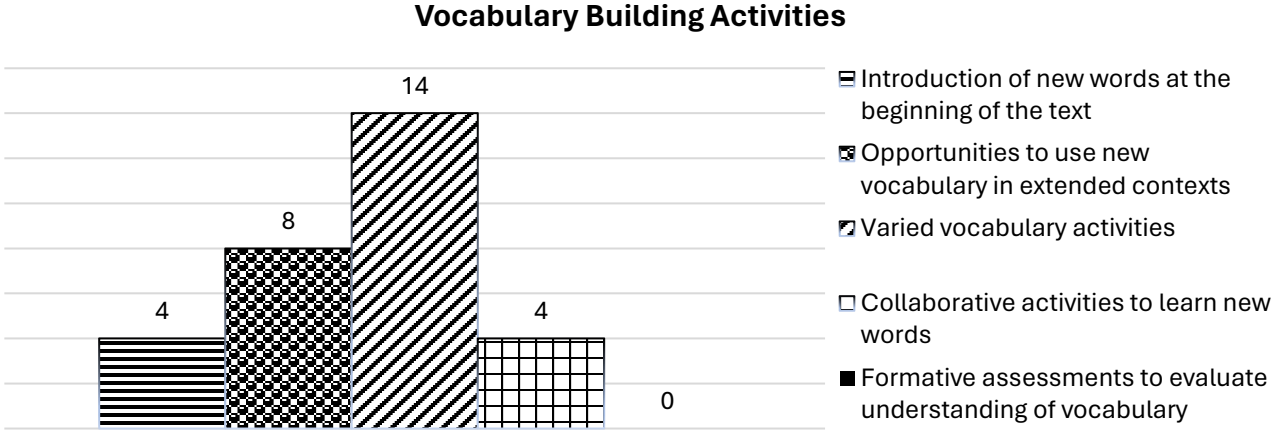


Figure 2. Distribution of activities related to Vocabulary Building

Reading for Main Ideas and Specific Information

The analysis reveals that the textbook contains a wide range of activities designed to enhance learners' ability to identify main ideas and specific information. Figure 3 presents an overview of these activities, illustrating their relative frequency within the textbook.

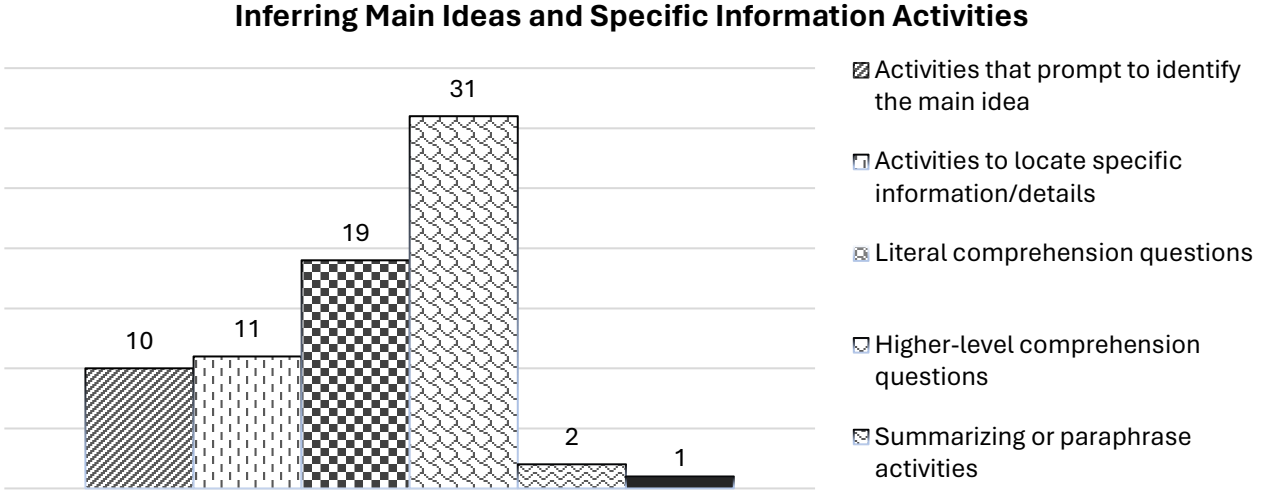


Figure 3. Distribution of activities related to Reading for Main Ideas & Specific Information

The textbook includes 10 activities that require learners to identify main ideas and 11 activities focused on locating specific information. Examples include tasks such as "Match the stanzas with the given summaries..." and "Look at the kinds of information mentioned in the news item and find answers...". These activities support reading comprehension and help learners develop skimming and scanning skills.

A range of differentiated comprehension questions is also evident, including 19 literal and 31 higher (including inferential and evaluative) comprehension questions, encouraging engagement with texts at varying cognitive levels. Illustrative examples include questions such as "Which team was the winner of the State Level School Quiz Competition?", "How did the Panchayat help Dhaniram?", and "Why did the people of the village call Khagen 'The Prince of Panidihing?'". However, opportunities for higher-order meaning-making are limited, with only two activities focusing on summarising and paraphrasing. Similarly, collaborative learning is minimally represented, with just one group or pair activity, as indicated by the instruction, "Discuss in groups and share what you have learnt about...". While such activities can foster peer interaction and shared understanding, their limited presence suggests restricted opportunities for collaborative comprehension building.

Relative distribution of different reading-focused activities

The findings highlight a noticeable variance in the distribution of reading-focused activities across the textbook. Out of a total denominator of 129 identified coding occurrences, the textbook dedicates the highest volume to reading for main ideas and specific information, accounting for 74 occurrences (57%). Vocabulary building activities come in second with 30 occurrences (23%), reflecting a moderate level of attention. Activities for developing fluent reading skills are the least represented, totalling 25 occurrences (19%). Figure 4 illustrates this percentage distribution across the three primary reading domains.

This pattern suggests that while the textbook places strong emphasis on comprehension-based activities, it provides relatively limited opportunities for learners to practice fluency-oriented reading. Likewise, the moderate focus on vocabulary-building activities may not be sufficient for learners in multilingual and resource-constrained contexts.

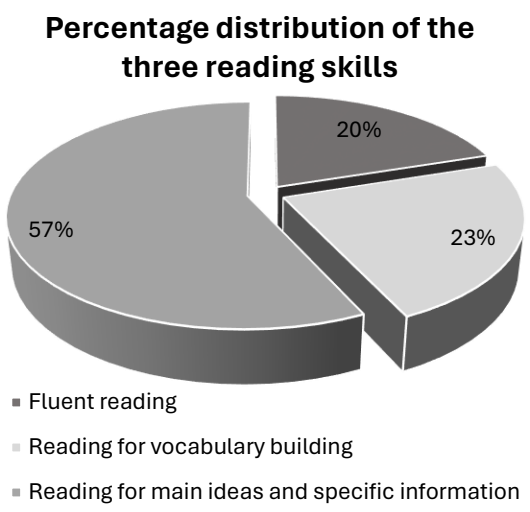


Figure 4. Percentage distribution of the activities across the three reading skills

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The textbook analysis revealed an uneven distribution of reading-related activities across the three reading components examined. Activities targeting reading comprehension occurred more frequently than those designed to support fluent reading or vocabulary development. This pattern indicates that the textbook provides substantially more opportunities for learners to engage in comprehension-oriented tasks than in activities explicitly focusing on reading fluency or vocabulary.

The predominance of comprehension-focused activities is broadly consistent with the emphasis on comprehension reflected in the NCERT (2017) learning outcomes, which include identifying main ideas, locating specific information, and making inferences. However, research on reading development suggests that fluent reading and vocabulary knowledge are also important components of reading proficiency (Kuhn & Stahl, 2003; Rasinski, 2012; Nation, 2013). Viewed alongside this literature, the comparatively smaller number of fluency- and vocabulary-oriented activities represents a pattern that curriculum developers may wish to consider when reviewing the distribution of reading activities in future textbook revisions.

It is important to note, however, that the present study examined only the frequency and type of textbook activities and did not evaluate how these activities were implemented in classrooms or their effects on learners' reading development. The findings therefore describe the learning opportunities afforded by the textbook rather than the effectiveness of the textbook

in promoting reading skills. Whether this distribution is pedagogically optimal cannot be determined from the present analysis alone and would require complementary evidence from classroom implementation and learner outcomes.

Accordingly, the findings may serve as a reference point for textbook writers, SCERT curriculum planners, and teachers. If future textbook revisions aim to provide more explicit support for multiple dimensions of reading, additional fluency-oriented activities (e.g., guided oral reading, repeated reading, or paired reading) and more systematic vocabulary-focused tasks could be incorporated alongside existing comprehension activities. Similarly, teachers who wish to emphasise these aspects of reading may consider supplementing the textbook with appropriate classroom activities, depending on their instructional context and learners' needs.

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