ONLINE READING HABITS OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN BANGLADESH & ITS EFFECTS IN ESL CLASSROOM

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Abstract: *With the current surge of modern digital technologies, the obsession with social media, smart-phones/televisions and other gadgets, the habit of reading books in the younger generation, is undergoing a decline. In fact, the poor performance of the university students in the ESL classroom has become a matter of great concern for any ESL teacher in Bangladesh. Consequently, the research problems as being the students' excessive interests in online activities and their disappointing academic performance badly demand an investigation of their online reading behaviour. Hence, this study keenly explores the online reading habits of university students in Bangladesh so as to determine the effects of their extreme preoccupation with online activities in the ESL classroom. In order to have a broad overview of the current reading habits, a questionnaire was provided to 80 university students from three different groups: Bangla, English & Madrasa Medium background. A correlation between reading habits and writing proficiency has also been drawn. Besides, students were asked to write a composition on a given topic to evaluate their writing skills. Based on the findings of a questionnaire-based survey and the assessment of their written composition, it is deemed that reading habit should be built and catered from the very childhood. This paper also attempts to provide some guidelines for the parents and the ESL teachers all over the world for improving the reading habit of students in particular and the larger cross-sections of people in general.*

K*eywords: Online Reading Habits, Digital Reading, Developing Reading Habits*

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Introduction

Reading is the fundamental and most essential process of learning. In one word, reading refers to understanding. It is the most important means of acquiring knowledge for personal growth and development. Reading enriches one's cognitive skills and enlightens one with knowledge. Tella, Adenyinka; & Akande, Samson (2007) admit that the ability to read is at the heart of self-education and lifelong learning and that it is an art capable of transforming life and society. Therefore, for students in general and specifically at the tertiary level must habituate reading to achieve excellence in academic performance and to achieve an effective learning. Reading habits ensure students to have effective study skills and provide with global knowledge.

Reading habits again enhance retention capacity in students no matter what level they belong to. Owusu-Acheaw, M., and Larson, A. G. (2014) confirm that reading is an essential tool for knowledge transfer and the habit of reading is an academic activity that increases skills in reading strategies.

English in Bangladesh: An Overview

Since the birth as an independent country, Bangladesh has witnessed an over-whelming importance of 'Bangla everywhere' (the *Bangla Procholon Ain* or Bangla Implementation Act was implemented in 1987, which inevitably affected and limited the use of English in the socio-cultural domain. Since then Bangla language has been used in much wider fields than ever before. This provides an adequate 'background to the policy decisions and the current status of English' (Banu & Sussex, 2001). Surprisingly this has not extinguished English. Though in the constitution of Bangladesh there is no declared place for English, yet the use of English is found in some government events or activities if the situation demands. On 19 January 1989, English was introduced as a compulsory language from Class I to class XII with students having to qualify in both English and Bangla in the board examinations. That means, in Bangladesh English is taught, in primary, secondary, higher secondary and tertiary levels, in all three categories of the education system: Bangla Medium, English Medium and Madrasa system (Rimi, R.N., 2017).

Literature Review

Reading as a Basic Skill

Through all the ages reading has been proved as the most powerful force in education. Reading lets an individual to peep into the past, to see the present and the future. Reading helps us transfer our knowledge from one generation to the other. Reading has undergone a drastic change in meaning and understanding over the years. Smith and Robinson (1980) explain 'reading as an active attempt on the part of the reader to understand the "writer's message'. Quadri and Abomoge (2013) refer to reading as a key to the wealth of experience that links people in a way far beyond distance or time. It can be inferred thus, that reading creates a remarkable experience that unlocks the gate of success to a student. It is an important skill for learners to be able to cope with the advancing world.

Reading is a mandatory prerequisite for effective learning habit which eventually develops students' academic performance. Aina, A. J., Ogungbeni, J. I., Adigun, J. A. and Ogundipe, T. C. (2011) assert that reading is a skill that must be nurtured from a child's earliest years and the habit of reading should begin at an early stage and should be imbibed throughout one's lifetime. However, reading is a persistent activity of day to day training that evolves into a habit and eventually a culture. Fisher B. (2001) mentions that reading is an intellectual activity which is possible only if a man has formed a habit of reading and practicing it since childhood.

The habit of reading must be cultivated and nurtured from the very childhood, so as to bring out the potential of the students in later life. One ongoing way to acquire new knowledge is to develop the habit of reading, which "develops a capacity for focused attention and growth", (National Endowment for the Arts, 2004). Obadiah, A. M. (2011) asserts that reading habit is the cultivation of an attitude and the possession of skills, that makes reading pleasurable, regular and a consistent activity. It is as if building a positive attitude towards reading which ultimately makes the act of reading a pleasure.

The improvement of academic performance of students is one of the fundamental objectives of any educational institution whose core vision is to develop human in character and excellence through teaching and research. Currently, the advent of the Internet has revolutionized the reading habits of students and its dominance is quite prevailing among the young people. With the growing amount of digital information available, people particularly young adults are found spending more time reading electronic materials (Liu, Z. 2005). However, the Internet has created an enabling platform where students can access information materials around the world at any location (Ramirez, E. 2003).

Current Reading Habits

Reading plays an important role in education as a means of creating a highly literate society. An information-oriented society would contribute not only to the individual's self-development but also toward the nation's progress (Kivunike, Ekenberg, Danielson, &Tusubira, 2014). For second language learners, learning involves collective skills. They also must cultivate the ability to transfer these skills from the classroom to the real world where the language, usually English, is used (Anderson, 2003). There is thus a strong correlation between reading proficiency and educational success, and learners of English tend to make greater progress in language learning when equipped with strengthened reading skills (Bharuthram, 2012).

Online/Digital Reading

In this world of technology, digital devices have become one of the most modernized educational tools. The Internet is a unique educational resource that enables educators to freely share and adapt the available knowledge for educational purposes and plays a major role in developmental challenges of all societies in the 21st century (Annand, 2015). Not only do digital devices continue to become more powerful, digital native learners who were born in this digital age think and process data differently from previous generations (Yagci, 2014). Shen L., (2006) found that students prioritize the internet as the information medium and they go online mainly to get information, send and receive emails, download music, and use the chat rooms.

Definition of Writing

Writing is synonymous with mental exercise when the writer jogs out ideas, brainstorms and puts the thoughts into words. According to Widdowson (2005:61), writing is the act of making up correct sentences and transmitting them through visual medium to manifest the graphology and grammatical system of the language. Writing is a challenging skill for students and the most complex activity among the four language skills in English as well.

Correlation Between Reading Habit and Writing Ability

Reading and writing are correlated. Reading is an essential prerequisite for writing. Reading happens to be the input whereas writing is an output. Hence the habit of reading affects the writing in so many different ways. Reading habit has an impact on writing ability to a great extent. Theoretically, if the students have a good reading habit, their writing ability is also good. So, there is a correlation between reading ability and writing ability (Kartal Z., 2017). A good writer must be a good reader.

Previous Studies

Several Past studies have confirmed that reading more is connected to better writing skills in both first and second language (Huang, 1996; Lee & Hsu, 2009; Lee & Krashen, 2002). Lee and Hsu (2009) reported significant gains in five key areas: fluency, content, organization, language use, vocabulary, and mechanics. Hafiz and Tudor (1989, 1990) and Tsang (1996) all

reported that their treatment groups had higher measurements of language use, specifically in syntax and semantics. However, not all of these studies had positive findings.

Some of the previously mentioned studies had negative findings as well. Tsang (1996) found that the treatment group did not outperform the comparison group in the areas of spelling, vocabulary, and organization. Hafiz and Tudor (1990) also reported that their treatment group did not significantly outperform their comparison group in the area of vocabulary.

Aims and Objectives of The Study

Teaching and learning at the tertiary level has become a great challenge for the teachers as well as for the learners. The diversion in reading habits of the learners as created by the mass and social media plays a havoc with the practices of good reading and studying habits. Beyond this, the by-products of scientific and technological inventions have adversely contributed to the declining standard of active reading among students (Owusu-Acheaw and Larson, 2014). The fact that university students are more engaged in using the technology even in the classroom has become one of the vital issues to consider in this research. The main objective of this study is to investigate the details of online reading habits of University students and its effects in ESL classroom in Bangladesh. The specific objectives of the study are to:

1. determine the types of information materials mostly read by students;
2. determine the time spent by the students on reading online including social media;
3. ascertain the purposes of reading online by students;
4. the effects of online reading in ESL classroom in Bangladesh (General assessment of the students' performance in ESL classroom) & their reading habits at early stages;
5. To determine the confidence level of the students in their academic performance;

Research-Questions

The following research questions were generated to guide this research:
1. What types of information materials are read by the university students in Bangladesh?
2. How much time do the university students spend in online reading (including social media)?
3. What are the purposes of their reading online?
4. What are the effects of online reading in ESL classroom in Bangladesh?
5. How much confidence do the students have in their academic performance;

Research Variables

Reading has always been one of the most important factors of learning process. Some studies have suggested that reading on screen encourages readers to skim a text to find specific information rather than going into depth, and as a result, online reading has reduced the readers' comprehension (Herold, 2014). Other researchers, such as Coiro and Dobler (2007), showed that online reading creates opportunities for readers to apply their background knowledge and use inferential reading strategies.

Research Hypothesis

Based on the various previous studies by the scholars and also the objectives of the study, the following hypotheses could be drawn:
1.Research hypothesis: There is a significant positive effect of students' online reading habits in the ESL classroom in Bangladesh.
2.The null hypothesis: There is no significant positive effect of students' online reading habits in the ESL classroom in Bangladesh.

Participants

A total of 80 students from two different universities participated in the survey. These students were from Bangla, English & Madrasa background.

Methodology

This research is qualitative as it is derived from the information of reading habits provided by the participants. They were interviewed regarding their reading habits in their childhood or during their school or college years.

A quantitative research was also drawn to measure the accurate results. The survey was conducted at different public and private universities in Bangladesh. A total of 80 students from Bangla, English & Madrasa background participated in the survey.

A structured questionnaire has been used to collect an overall data which would measure their habit of reading and the effects of online reading on their academic performance. Students were also interviewed in the first place to identify their academic & family background, which focused light on their practices of English in their early/daily life.

A writing test was conducted to measure the students' performance in writing. The students were asked to write a paragraph on a given topic to find out any possible influence of their online reading habits on their writing skills. An overall assessment of the classroom performance has been recorded as well to measure their academic performance. Students' confidence level was also considered to measure their academic performance. A comparative study has been done among the students of English/Bangla medium & Madrasa background. This comparison has been done to find out about the exact influence of online reading habits on their academic performance.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for the entire research has been done manually. At first, in the data analysis procedure part, the questionnaire was checked. The questions were set carefully so that the main concern of this research could be focused. The questions in the questionnaire included purposes & nature of & the time spent on reading online. Students' writing copies were checked manually to find out their standards in writing skills. The general classroom assessment had been considered in terms of percentage of how much learners could improve themselves in general interaction or conversation in the ESL classroom in Bangladesh.

Findings and Discussions

80 students from two different universities participated in the survey. At first, they were asked about their academic & family background to find out if they had any exposure to the English language prior to their admission at the universities. The percentage of these three groups of students (students from English/Bangla medium & Madrasa background) are shown in a pie chart below:
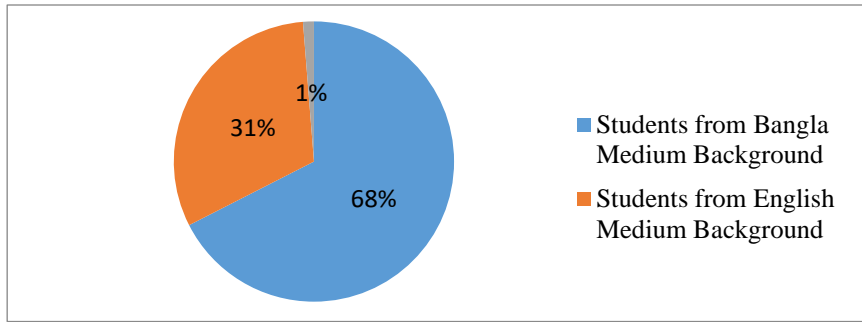
Figure 1: Students from English/Bangla Medium/Madrasa Background

The chart represents that among the participants 68% of students were from Bangla medium background, 31% of students were from Bangla medium background & 1% of students were from Madrasa background.

Analysis of the Research Questions
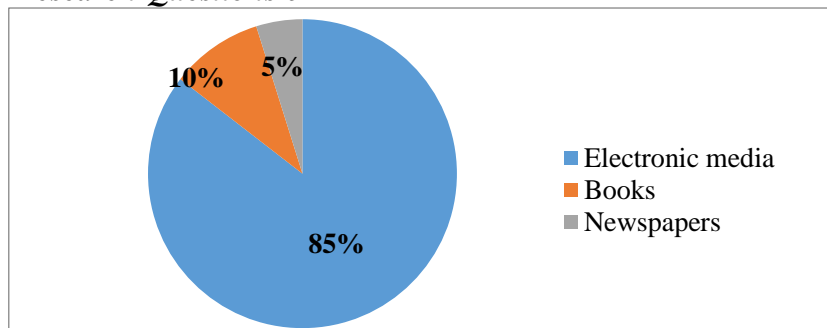
Research Questions 01

Figure 2: Sources Learners Use to Seek Information or To Update Subject Knowledge

The first research question was, 'What types of information materials are read by the university students in Bangladesh? The survey shows that 85% of students use Electronic media that is they read online, 10% learners read books & only 5% of students read Newspaper to seek information or to update their subject knowledge. My first research question--'What types of information materials do they read?' is clearly answered.
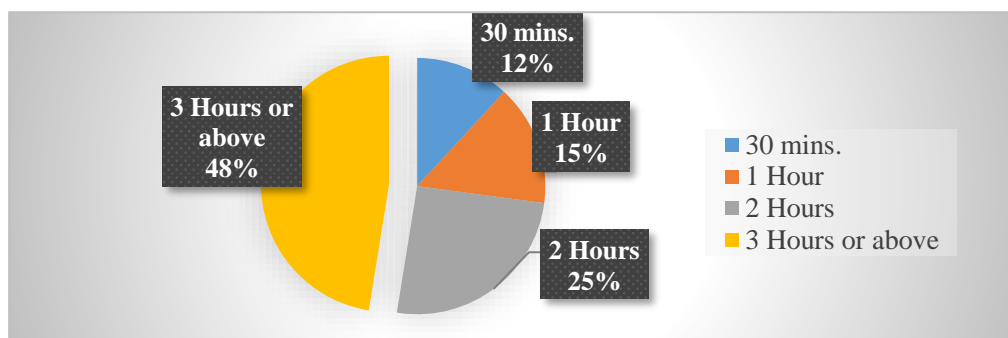
Research Question 02

Figure 3: Time Spent on Online Social Media

The survey shows that 12% of students spend 30 minutes on online social media, 15% of students spend 1 hour, 25% of students spend 2 hours & 48% of students spend 3 hours or more time on online social media. So, it indicates that most of the students are spending more time in social media where they are busy chatting/messaging. According to Auer (2014), with the advent of technology in education, digital reading materials have increasingly been used in the

classroom and more students today are using mobile devices as learning tools.This survey proves the fact that most time is spent in social media rather than any educational sites. Social media includes Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or Snapchat where the students are busy chatting/messaging. My second question, 'How much time do university students spend in online reading?' has also been clearly addressed.
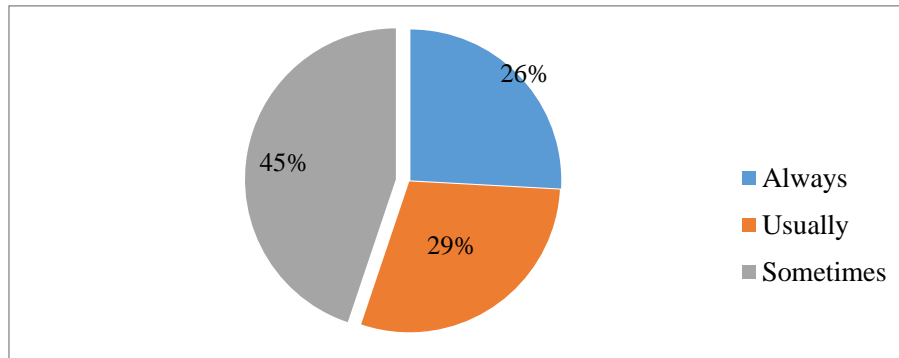
Research Question 03

Figure 4: Number of Students Reading Online Articles for Academic Purpose

The pie chart in Fig.4 shows that 45% of students 'Sometimes' read online articles for academic purposes. The other measures were 29% for the category of 'Always' & 26% for 'Usually'. My third research question is, 'What are the purposes of their reading online? This means that all the students read online articles for academic purposes at a different reading frequency.

Observation of the Students' Writing Skills (General assessment of the students' performance in ESL classroom) & their reading habits at early stages
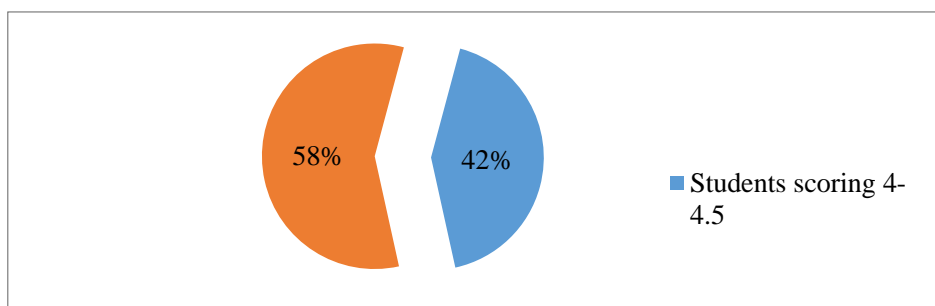
Research Question 04

Figure 5: Marks Obtained by The Students in The Writing Skills

My fourth research question is, 'What are the effects of online reading in ESL classroom in Bangladesh? The observation of the students' writing skills was found to be one of the most realistic and exciting measures to identify their level of Academic performance. Students were asked to write a short paragraph on "Things I like to do on a Rainy Day" in about 100-150 words & the total mark was 5. 58% of students scored from 2-3.5 & 42% of students score from 4-4.5.

My fourth research question is, 'What are the effects of online reading in ESL classroom in Bangladesh? The observation of the students' writing skills was found to be one of the most realistic and exciting measures to identify their level of Academic performance. Students were asked to write a short paragraph on "Things I like to do on a Rainy Day" in about 100-150 words & the total mark was 5. 58% of students scored from 2-3.5 & 42% of students score from 4-4.5. Students scoring from 2-3.5 had certain syntactical errors in their writing. Many of

them were unable to put their ideas into organized sentences. They lacked appropriate vocabulary as well as linking words. On the other hand, students scoring from 4-4.5 did very well. They had well-organized sentence structures. Most of the writings were to the point. They had the appropriate choice of vocabulary.

After the observation, it was clear that the majority of the students had huge problems with Grammar. Majority of the students who did well were from English medium background & few of them were from Bangla medium background.

The Relationship Between Online Reading Habits and Writing Competency

It was clear from the above test results (*Fig.5)* that the students who had an early exposure to the English language at their schools, colleges & also at home, could produce good compositions. These students (as found out from their interview), had already developed a good reading habit from the very childhood. So, their habits of online reading helped them develop & enrich their quality of English even more. On the other hand, most students from Bangla medium background hardly had any exposure to the English language at their schools, colleges or at home. Krashen, S. (1982) says, "Hypothesizing that writing style comes from reading, not from writing or instruction, is consistent with what is known about language acquisition: Most of language acquisition takes place subconsciously, not through deliberate study, and it is a result of input (comprehension), not output (production)." Krashen, S. (1993) also says, "A substantial amount of research strongly suggests that we learn to write by reading. To be more precise, we acquire writing style, the special language of writing, by reading." Reading indeed accelerates language acquisition as it provides examples of good compositions. Harmer (1998) mentions that reading is a model of language, reading texts provide opportunities to study a language such as; vocabulary, grammar, punctuation and the way to construct sentence, paragraph and text.

But in this study, online reading habit could not develop the English of the students of Bangla/Madrasa medium background. In a previous study, Tsang (1996) found that the treatment group did not outperform the comparison group in the areas of spelling, vocabulary, and organization. Again, Hafiz and Tudor (1990) also reported that their treatment group did not significantly outperform their comparison group in the area of vocabulary.

In this study, the only evidence or influence of online reading, chatting or messaging reflected in their writing was their uses of contracted words or informal usage of certain English expressions/phrases or words. For example:

> 1. I *kinda* like rainy day. ('*Kind of*' is contracted to *'kinda'*).

> 2. *Like* all the roads *r* blocked. (the word *'Like'* at the opening of a sentence & *'r'* instead of *'are'*).

> 3. I always *wanna* have khichuri (yellow rice) *nd* beef bhuna (beef curry) on a rainy day. (*'wanna'* & *'nd'* instead of *'want to'* & *'and'* respectively).

> 4. *Um* always happy when it is raining. (*'Um'* instead of *'I am'* or *'I'm'*)

The grammar problems were found to be doubled and tripled as they frequently used certain words informally in academic writing as well.

General Assessment of The Students' Performance in ESL Classroom and Their Reading Habits at Early Stages

The students' classroom performance had been recorded over the three months during the semester. At the beginning of this research, each student was asked both about his/her academic

& family background as well as his/her earlier reading habits. The observation was studied carefully and put into a conclusion that students (from English medium) with a convenient & playful environment where English had been practiced naturally were more interactive in the ESL classroom. On the contrary, many students could not show any significant improvement in their classroom performance nor could they prove to be interactive in the ESL classroom. This fact clarifies that reading online could not influence all the students at the same pace no matter how much time they spent on this. The development that they made in academic performance was just minimal and not significant or remarkable.

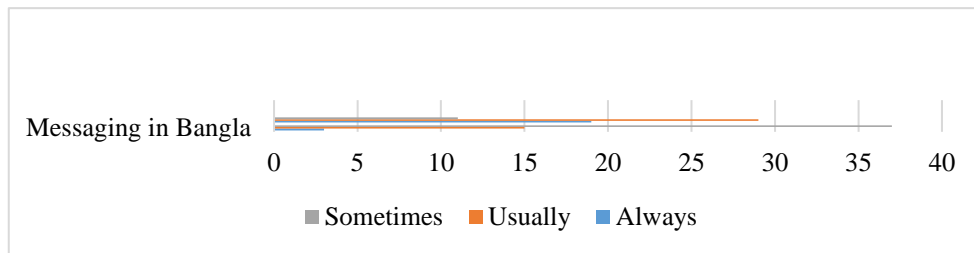*The Frequency of Online Messaging in English Vs Bangla*

Figure 6: Online Messaging: English vs Bangla

The students' classroom performance had also been measured by their use of language while messaging/chatting online. The bars show that Bangla was used more in the category of 'Sometimes' but English was used more in both the categories of 'Usually' & 'Always.' This suggests that English was given more preference over Bangla, though this did not prove that the language (in case of English) of the text messages were necessarily meant to be written in Grammatically correct English, which again was by their poor performance in the written test (*Fig.5*).

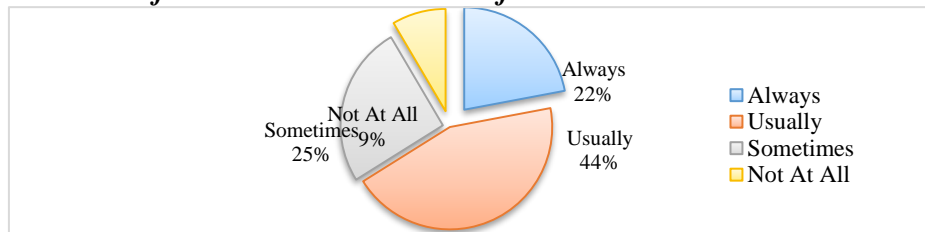*Students' Confidence Level in Their Performance in ESL Classroom*

Figure 7: Students' Confidence Level in Their Performance in ESL Classes

Students' confidence level was also considered to measure their academic performance. 44% of students considered themselves to be 'Usually' confident in ESL classes. 25% of students were 'Sometimes' confident, 22% of students were 'Always' confident & 9% students were 'Not at All' confident in ESL classes. Though 44% students claimed to be 'Usually' confident, their performance in the writing skills (58% students scored from 2-3.5 & 42% students score from 4-4.5: Fig.5) proved this number to be invalid.

Research Hypothesis
Based on the objectives of the study, the following hypotheses could be drawn:
1. Research hypothesis: There is a significant positive effect of students' online reading habits in the ESL classroom in Bangladesh
2. The null hypothesis: There is no significant positive effect of students' online reading habits in the ESL classroom in Bangladesh

i) Firstly, the fact became obvious and crystal clear after the writing test that the students who had previous exposure to the English language at their schools, colleges & also at home, could produce good compositions. These students (as found out from their interview), had already developed a good reading habit from the very childhood. So, their habits of online reading enriched their English even more. On the other hand, most of the students from Bangla medium background not having sufficient earlier exposure to the English language failed to perform as it has been anticipated. The only evidence or influence of online reading, chatting/messaging reflected in their writing was their uses of contracted words or informal usage of certain English expressions/phrases or fragmented words. According to Rimi R.N., (2017): "The difficulties in grammar faced by the Bangla Medium students are multifarious in ESL classrooms in Bangladesh. The reasons are also varied to address with. The lack of students' participation, inadequately trained language teachers, limited resources, suitable environment, lack of student's motivation, lack of teaching tools, lack of proficiency in using the tools are the major problems to identify."

ii) Secondly, as the students' performance had been observed, recorded & studied carefully over the three months during the semester, a conclusion could be easily drawn that students (from English medium) with a convenient & playful environment where English had been practiced naturally were found more interactive in the ESL classroom. This fact indicates that online reading habit could not influence all the students (students from English, Bangla, Madrasa background) at the same pace, rather many of them just used English in a more informal way even in academic writing. Majority of the students could not show any significant improvement/development in their classroom performance nor could they prove to be interactive in the ESL classroom. The Changes in the reading habits of the students seem to be taking place, though they are not very remarkable (Mahmud K.,Mirza G.H.,2012). In spite of some positive findings, Tsang (1996), Hafiz and Tudor (1990) also found some negative findings. Coiro and Doblers (2007), showed that online reading creates opportunities for readers to apply their background knowledge and use inferential reading strategies. But these learners could not get any proper background knowledge.

Likewise, both the Hypotheses are partially proven, but an important condition is demanded that:

If the guidance for reading online is provided for the weaker students, they might develop in their academic performance in ESL classroom, which again demands further research or follow-up Studies.

Limitations
There have been certain limitations to the research. The research could be done only at the tertiary level & also in the urban area. The research could not be run in the areas where there was no access to the internet.

Recommendations
Students should develop a reading habit from the very elementary stages. Teachers & parents can be benefited by the recommendations as mentioned below:

i) At first, the reading habit can be developed at home. The Parents and the siblings can inspire the small children by creating an atmosphere of reading books. They should provide reading materials for their children. The parents can read books to the small children even before they start their school. They should also create a conducive environment for them to learn and study (Florence F.O., Hameed O.A.A., Alaba B., Adewumi O.M., 2017).

ii) Children can be provided with the picture books, graded reading books or comic books gradually. At school, they could be encouraged to read different adventure books or biographies. Teachers at school could arrange a particular class for reading interesting story books to the elementary students.

iii) At the tertiary level, the students could be exposed to a wide variety of reading materials to read online all guided by the teachers. Manan N.A.A.,Alias A.A., Yusof J., Pandian A.(2012) showed in their research: "By taking advantage on the popularity of Facebook, the teacher could set up communication network among students in the class easily."

iv) The weak students should be divided into small groups and put under the supervision of the teachers for the whole period of their study at the university. A particular teacher will ensure a regular input through reading for the students of a particular group (Mahmud K., Mirza G.H., 2012).

Conclusion
Modern technology has opened an access to the internet for everyone. Students at this age should find it more convenient and handier to surf the net and read online than holding a tangible book. They are privileged to have the internet at their fingertips, so online reading materials become more affordable and easier (Mlay, S.V. Sabi, H.M., Tsuma C.K., Langmia K., 2015). Reading online "…also presents many new positive effects on reading (Ofstad 2005). Andrew (2004, as cited in Ofstad, 2005:47) in his conclusion mentions, "We need to make reading, which is in its essence a solitary endeavour, a social one as well, to encourage the great thrill of finding kinship in shared experiences of books." So, students and specifically weaker ones should be guided by the teachers even more so that they can develop their English and be able to use the same for academic purposes as well as in every sphere of life successfully and confidently.

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Appendix

Questionnaire for the students:

Dear participants,

I am conducting a research on the "Online Reading Habits of University Students in Bangladesh & its Effects in ESL Classroom." The aim of this research is to identify students' online reading habits & its effect in the ESL classroom. I have designed a short questionnaire

for you based on the topic. It will take your 10–15 minutes of your time. Please complete the following questionnaire.

Thank you
Rezina Nazneen Rimi

Please put a tick (✓) marks in the boxes below:

No	Questions	Feedback			
		Newspapers	Books	Magazines & journals	Electronic media
1	Which Sources do you use to seek information or to update subject knowledge?	☐	☐	☐	☐
2	How much time do you spend on online Social Media?	30 mins	1 hour	2 hours	3 hours or above
		☐	☐	☐	☐
3	How often do you use Bangla while messaging online?	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Not at all
		☐	☐	☐	☐
4	How often do you use English while messaging online?	☐	☐	☐	☐
5	Do you read online articles for academic purposes?	☐	☐	☐	☐
6	Has online reading increased your confidence level in your performance in ESL classes?	☐	☐	☐	☐