

# How Bangladesh sought to improve its primary-school textbooks

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Although the impact of textbooks on learning outcomes has been documented in several studies, the focus has always been on the relative number of textbooks rather than the quality of the textbook. Since the quality of a textbook can vary as much as that of a teacher, surely a good textbook has more effect on learning than a less good one? And surely a better or more appropriate textbook will lead to better learning outcomes?

In the world of commercial publishing, the success of a textbook is measured in sales. The more effective the textbook, the more copies are sold. In the world of government textbook publishing, however, the effect must be measured in terms of improved system-wide results that are almost impossible to trace back to the effect of the textbooks. Improved outcomes might be the result of several factors that have undergone a change at the same time: new textbooks are often introduced with new curricula, supported by more training for teachers. Designing an educational experiment in which other factors are controlled in order to isolate the effect of the textbook has not been a fruitful area of research. In the

absence of such studies, it is reasonable to identify the features of commercially successful textbooks and find ways of adapting those features to the local context. This is how change happens in many arenas.

## New textbooks for a new curriculum

Ever since Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, government school textbooks have been published and distributed by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) – or its predecessor agency – based in the capital, Dhaka. In common with many countries of limited incomes, learning in school in Bangladesh equates to learning from a single textbook per subject. In Classes 1 and 2, children are provided with textbooks for just four subjects – Bangla, maths, religious studies and English – while other textbooks are introduced in Class 3. Each textbook is supported by a teacher's edition, which includes reproductions of the pages of the textbook as well as notes on teaching each lesson.



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*There has been little discussion of the pros and cons of phonetics in Bangladesh*

With an annual output of 230 million textbooks per year (for both primary and secondary schools), NCTB describes itself as the largest publisher in the world. For the past three years, and with the support of the second phase of the multiple-donor-funded Primary Education Development Programme (PEDP II), NCTB managed to publish and print this vast number of textbooks through subcontracting some 70 printers and delivering the books to all schools in time for the start of each school year.

## Textbook updates

### English language

With regard to the English textbooks, the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) were more integrated in the refined textbooks, and the activities were made more child-friendly, with a shift from English as a body of knowledge to be memorised to viewing it as a set of skills to be practised through a controlled introduction of material, with ample opportunities to revise and recycle. The page layouts and illustrations were fully overhauled.

### Bangladesh and global studies

These textbooks were restructured on the basis of a double-page spread per topic, with a reduction in the amount of textual input and a new focus on higher order activities moving from 'speak', to 'write', to 'extend', to 'check'. For the first time, children studying social studies in Bangladesh will not be expected to memorise lengthy chunks of text and will not be tested on their ability merely to repeat the texts they have learned.

### Bangla language

The work on the Bangla language material was more of a challenge. Bangladesh has adopted a whole language approach to the teaching of literacy. This is interpreted in a variety of ways, sometimes placing the principle of 'whole words' or 'sight words' at the heart of the approach. Recognising that the brief did not extend to a comprehensive review of the whole language approach, the consultants drew on the approach almost universally followed in the teaching of reading and writing in France, where integrated textbooks combining reading, language study and grammar are more comparable with the approach in Bangladesh. The refined textbooks also place a greater emphasis on phonics within the whole language approach, with a more integrated, consolidated and engaging treatment. In Classes 4 and 5, questions of the PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) type were added, to develop analytical and critical thinking skills and to move students beyond the point of simply being able to read for rudimentary factual understanding. The detailed knowledge of Bangla language and orthography was provided by IED, which was able to draw on its own considerable experience in the field of literacy teaching.

All the textbooks were revised in terms of the level of language, design and illustration, and short introductions were added – separate from the introductions in the teacher's editions – to explain the approach to teachers who might not have access to a teacher's edition, as well as to other stakeholders.

In 2013, having achieved its initial PEDP II target of printing an adequate number of textbooks and delivering them to schools on time, NCTB turned its attention to the next target of quality. Improved textbooks would support the new primary school curriculum that will be formally rolled out in January 2015.

As a result, for the very first time in its history, NCTB sought to find ways of improving its primary school textbooks on the lines of comparable textbooks used in other countries. The decision would mean inviting international textbook specialists to work alongside NCTB's own teams of curriculum and textbook writers. In previous years, NCTB had contracted limited aspects (design and illustration) of publishing services to a local non-governmental organisation (NGO), the Institute of Educational Development (IED). On this occasion, NCTB sought to 'refine', in its own terms, the textbook content and pedagogy itself. In other words, it would seek to improve the teaching as well as the learning by means of improved textbooks.

### Development partners

The UK, as one of the development partners in the programme, decided to support the initiative and contracted CfBT, a UK-based education consultancy, to provide international expertise in writing and publishing textbooks in first language literacy (Bangla), English, and the combined Bangladesh and global studies. At the same time, Japan, another development partner of the programme, agreed to provide similar support for mathematics and science through an existing Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) project managed by Hiroshima University.

### Background research and surveys

The starting point for the textbook refinement was based on research conducted in randomly selected primary schools, including seeking the views of the children themselves, to determine which aspects of the textbooks and teacher's editions were seen as being more or less effective, and why. At the same time, the consultants carried out a survey to determine international standards among primary school textbooks in the five target subjects and presented the results to NCTB.

The survey of international textbooks was a vital step. It gave NCTB concrete examples of alternative ways of writing and publishing. In the case of the English, and the Bangladesh and global studies textbooks, the task was more or less straightforward, since comparable examples were relatively easy to find. In the case of Bangla language, it was less so. In spite of the many international conferences held over the decades to explore the interrelationship of English as a foreign language (EFL) pedagogy and textbooks, with each new development in pedagogy reflected in new textbooks for every segment of the vast textbook market – and similar, if less widespread, conferences on best practice in subjects such as mathematics – little attention has been given to what works in terms of textbooks for the teaching of first language literacy.

A search through the papers published by the International Association for Research on Textbooks and Educational Media (IARTEM) reveals the apparent disinterest. This is curious, especially given the long-running debate in the English-speaking world over

approaches to the teaching of reading and writing, including the often heated exchanges regarding the importance of the role of phonics.

One of the reasons that debates over the pedagogy of teaching English literacy has not spilled over into other first language teaching – even among the countries of the Commonwealth – is the form of the learning materials used for teaching literacy in English-speaking countries. In the UK, for example, textbooks have not been a feature of primary school learning for generations, while in the USA the teaching of reading is centred on the so-called basal reader in which language and literature are separate: literature consists of a wide range of sources often derived from reading books published for the commercial market.

The consultants also developed short samples of what the new refined textbooks for Bangladesh might look like. By now, NCTB was enthusiastic.

The work was made simpler due to the fact that NCTB publishes English-language editions of its textbooks, which are used in a small number of government schools that cater for returnee Bangladeshi migrants whose children have been raised in English-speaking environments. Therefore, for the Bangladesh and global studies textbooks, the work could be conducted via English-language materials before being translated back into Bangla and edited.

In order to manage the work, CfBT subcontracted two Bangladesh NGOs: one with expertise in educational research, the other with experience in educational publishing. The two NGOs were selected through a limited tender exercise. Subcontracting to the local NGOs was a significant factor in the successful outcome of the project. The arrangement between international consultants, local consultants and the client (NCTB) was effective on several levels: drawing on best international practices and concrete experience in textbook writing and publishing as well as minimising the need for expensive, long-term, in-country international consultancies. Over a period of 12 months, the three CfBT consultants visited the country half a dozen times each, for one to three weeks, but the local NGO was able to provide publishing support throughout the entire period, with small teams dedicated to the three subjects.

## Seeing updates in print

By the end of April 2014 the international consultants, together with the local NGO, had delivered print-ready files for textbooks and teachers' editions for Classes 1 to 3 in Bangla and English, and Class 3 in Bangladesh and social studies. The textbooks for Classes 4 and 5 were delivered to NCTB at the end of August 2014. Along with the JICA-supported mathematics and science textbooks, NCTB has succeeded in commissioning an almost complete new set of teaching and learning materials for the five grades of primary schools.

What next for NCTB's textbook refinement initiative? It has already approached both the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and JICA for further support for the religious studies materials (NCTB publishes textbooks for the four religious communities that are officially recognised in Bangladesh: Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity) and environmental studies. Additional research is also needed on the effectiveness of the newly refined textbooks, following the programme of nationwide teacher orientation and the introduction of the textbooks in the schools in 2015.

This brief narrative does not capture the hurly-burly nature of such collaborations. But the set of textbooks that will be published under the name of Bangladesh's National Curriculum and Textbook Board is the fruit of an authentic partnership between international and national experience and expertise, and should provide a significant improvement in the quality of learning in the government's primary schools.

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