Assessing English Writing Competence Among Secondary Level Students in Bangladesh: Challenges and Considerations

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Abstract: This study examines the challenges and considerations involved in evaluating English writing skills among secondary-level students in Bangladesh. Despite the increasing emphasis on English proficiency due to globalization and educational reforms, assessing students' writing competence remains fraught with complexities. The research identifies key problems such as large class sizes, inadequate teacher training in assessment methodologies, insufficient instructional time, and an overreliance on summative examinations that prioritize rote learning over communicative competence. Additionally, socio-cultural factors—including students' limited exposure to authentic English usage and their reliance on native language structures—further hinder effective evaluation. Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data from teachers, students, and curriculum documents, this study highlights the need for more formative, process-oriented assessment practices, clear rubrics, and capacity-building initiatives to enhance teachers' evaluative skills. The findings underscore that any effort to improve English writing assessment must consider not only pedagogical reforms but also systemic issues within Bangladesh's secondary education context. Recommendations are proposed to support a more valid, reliable, and learner-centered approach to evaluating writing proficiency.

Introduction

Writing is a powerful medium that allows people to express their thoughts in writing.Writing can improve one's ability to learn, their way of thinking, build concepts and ideas, and helps to discover connections between abstract and personal experiences. The purpose of this study is thus to focus on what strategies there are that teachers are using to improve learners' writing skills, what challenges learners face during writing as well as how and whether students are progressing using those strategies. For instance, teachers have to pay attention to the development of these skills by providing open/close-ended questions, assignments, presentations, critical thinking questions, debate practices, and writing practices among students (Chittooran, 2015). It is also observed that when a teacher applies different types of

fun activities, games and small group competition in writing classes, students become motivated to participate in the lessons and write something, thereby strengthening their writing and grammar. Teachers need to provide feedback on spelling, incorrect sentence, grammatical mistakes, sentence construction and give comments on the scripts so that learners can identify their level among all of the students (Sikder, 2013). Thus, teachers should apply collaborative activities in writing class that helps learners promote their higher level of thinking that helps them to gain knowledge (Jaques, 2000).Moreover, to develop writing skills, our secondary curriculum adopted the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach for teaching English, which will enable students to communicate appropriately in a real-life situation (Sultana &Ahsan, 2013).Teachers are supposed to teach writing skills of the English language through songs, role-plays ,games, stories, pictures and several interactive activities by ensuring students' active participation in individual work, English has assumed a critical role in Bangladesh's educational landscape, functioning both as a subject of study and as a gateway to higher education and global opportunities (Hamid &Baldauf, 2008). At the secondary level, English writing skills are especially significant, as they reflect learners' ability to communicate effectively and to engage in academic discourse beyond their native language (Rahman, 2019). However, evaluating writing proficiency in English presents persistent challenges for teachers and policymakers alike. One of the primary obstacles lies in the traditional assessment practices that dominate Bangladesh's secondary education system. These practices often emphasize memorization, mechanical reproduction of model texts, and summative examinations over authentic, process-based writing (Choudhury, 2001; Kabir, 2015). As a result, students may achieve high marks without developing genuine communicative competence. Additionally, teachers frequently lack adequate training and resources to implement more holistic and reliable methods of assessment (Hamid & Honan, 2012).Socio-cultural and contextual factors further complicate the evaluation of English writing. Many students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom, and their writing is influenced by native language structures and cultural norms (Rahman & Pandian, 2018). Large class sizes and time constraints also reduce opportunities for individualized feedback, making it difficult to diagnose learners' strengths and weaknesses accurately (Ali & Walker, 2014).

Given these challenges, it is essential to critically examine the problems and considerations surrounding the evaluation of English writing skills at the secondary level in Bangladesh. A deeper understanding of these issues can inform more effective assessment practices and contribute to the development of students' communicative abilities in English.

1.2 Background of the Topic

English is widely recognized as a global language and is essential for international communication, academic advancement, and economic development. In Bangladesh, English holds the status of a compulsory subject in the national curriculum from primary through tertiary levels (Hamid &Baldauf, 2008). The ability to write effectively in English is not only a crucial academic skill but also a key determinant of students' future opportunities in higher education and employment, both domestically and internationally.

At the secondary education level, writing is one of the four core language skills emphasized in the English syllabus. However, writing remains the most challenging for Bangladeshi students to master and for teachers to assess accurately (Rahman & Pandian, 2018). Despite curriculum reforms that advocate for communicative and learner-centered approaches, the assessment of writing often relies on traditional, summative examinations. These typically emphasize grammar, structure, and memorization of model answers, rather than students' ability to express original ideas or demonstrate communicative competence (Choudhury, 2001; Kabir, 2015).

Several systemic factors contribute to the ineffective evaluation of writing skills. Teachers frequently receive limited training in writing instruction and assessment techniques, and the lack of standardized, practical assessment rubrics leads to inconsistencies in grading (Hamid & Honan, 2012). Furthermore, the large student-to-teacher ratio and limited classroom time make it difficult for teachers to provide individualized feedback, which is essential for developing writing proficiency.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Kannan (2009:2) States that, " Even though students are studying English, they are not ableto produce even a singlesentencswithout any grammatical error in English". For instance, it is proved that there is a need for trained teachers to improve their strategies, attitude and try out new strategies. The process of writing how to write well necessities that they get sufficient practice and guidelines of writing. The classroom should be a place where students should be taught to write in a fun way so that they can have real life experience while learning to write in a new language (Sherin, 2016).The study attempts to fill the gap in knowledge by highlighting the ways that teachers need to address about why learners have great fear to write any thing in their own words and why they face many challenges to write English. From these problem, teachers need to apply different strategies. However, "students need to be aware that good writing is not just grammatically accurate and that the

otherfactors such as organization, coherence, and the use of cohesive devices are essential elements of good writing" (Leki,2001,p.290).

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The primary aim of this study is to examine the current practices, challenges, and pedagogical considerations in evaluating English writing skills at the secondary level in Bangladesh. The study seeks to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. To identify the existing methods and tools used for assessing English writing skills in secondary schools in Bangladesh.
2. Explore the challenges faced by English language teachers in evaluating students' writing effectively and reliably. Analyses the alignment between the national curriculum goals and actual classroom assessment practices in writing.
3. Investigate the influence of contextual factors such as class size, teacher training, student background, and resources on the evaluation process.
4. To propose recommendations for improving the assessment of writing skills, with a focut validity, reliability, and learner-centered approaches.

1.5 Justification of the Study

The evaluation of English writing skills is a critical component of language education that significantly influences students' academic achievement and their preparedness for higher education and professional life. In the context of Bangladesh, where English functions as a vital instrument for social mobility and global engagement, ensuring effective assessment practices is of paramount importance (Hamid &Baldauf, 2008).Despite curricular reforms emphasizing communicative competence, the prevailing assessment methods at the secondary level continue to prioritize rote memorization and formulaic writing tasks over authentic expression and critical thinking (Rahman & Pandian, 2018). This misalignment between policy and practice has contributed to widespread inadequacies in students' writing proficiency. Furthermore, systemic challenges such as insufficient teacher training, large class sizes, limited resources, and socio-cultural constraints continue to undermine the quality and fairness of writing assessment (Kabir, 2015; Ali & Walker, 2014).

This study is therefore justified on several grounds. First, it addresses a clear gap in empiricalresearch concerning how English writing skills are evaluated in Bangladeshi secondary schools and what challenges educators face in implementing effective assessment strategies. Second, by documenting and analyzing these challenges, the research will contribute to a deeper understanding of the barriers that

inhibit students' development of writing competence. Third, the study has practical significance: its findings can inform policymakers, curriculum developers, and teacher educators in designing more appropriate, context-sensitive assessment approaches that promote genuine learning rather than superficial performance.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

While this study aims to provide valuable insights into the evaluation of English writing skills at the secondary level in Bangladesh, several limitations should be acknowledged:The study will be conducted in a limited number of secondary schools, primarily in selected urban and semi-urban areas. As such, the findings may not fully represent the diverse contexts of all schools across Bangladesh, particularly those in rural or under-resourced regions.Due to time limitations, the research will focus primarily on teachers' perspectives and a sample of students' writing samples. A more longitudinal approach, which could capture changes over time and the impact of interventions, falls outside the scope of this project.Much of the data will be gathered through interviews and questionnaires with teachers. As with all self-reported data, there is a risk of bias, including the possibility that respondents may provide socially desirable answers rather than fully candid responses.Classroom observations will be restricted to a small number of lessons, which may not capture the full range of assessment practices or the variability in teachers' approaches over an academic year.This study is limited to the secondary level and does not examine writing assessment practices in primary or tertiary education, which may also influence students' writing development. The study will not be able to incorporate advanced statistical analyses or large-scale standardized testing due to budgetary and logistical constraints.Despite these limitations, the study is expected to yield meaningful insights that can inform improvements in assessment practices and provide a foundation for future, more extensive research.

1.7 Research Questions

1. What methods and tools are currently used to evaluate English writing skills at the secondary level in Bangladesh?
2. What challenges do English language teachers encounter when assessing students' writing performance?
3. To what extent are the existing assessment practices aligned with the objectives of the national English curriculum?
4. How do contextual factors such as class size, teacher training, instructional time, and students' linguistic backgrounds influence the evaluation of writing skills?

5. What strategies and recommendations can be proposed to improve the validity, reliability, and effectiveness of English writing assessment in Bangladeshi secondary schools?

1.8 Research Methodology

In the research methodology, I followed the research tools like; students' survey, teachers' interview, focus group discussion and classroom observation. All the four methodologies were given an equal importance in the research with the equal contribution to the found data.Data collection relied on multiple methods to enhance the credibility and triangulation of findings. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers to explore their instructional practices, assessment techniques, and the challenges they face in developing students' writing proficiency. Each interview lasted between forty-five minutes to one hour and was audio-recorded with the consent of participants. Additionally, focus group discussions were organized with students to gather their views on classroom activities, feedback mechanisms, and motivational factors influencing their writing development. These discussions encouraged students to express their opinions freely and build on each other's responses, enriching the depth of the data.To further understand assessment practices, the researcher collected and analyzed samples of students' written scripts from recent school examinations. These documents provided evidence of common errors, recurring weaknesses, and the criteria used by teachers to evaluate writing. Classroom observations were also conducted to examine how writing tasks were introduced, guided, and assessed in real instructional settings. Detailed field notes were taken to record interactions, instructional strategies, and the learning environment. All data were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis. Codes were developed inductively by closely reading the transcripts and identifying patterns across the data sources. Writing and practices aimed at improving English writing assessment in Bangladesh's secondary education sector.

1.9 Literature Review

The assessment of English writing skills has been extensively discussed in second and foreign language education. Writing is recognized as a complex skill that integrates linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural competencies (Hyland, 2003). Weigle (2002) emphasizes that effective writing assessment must balance attention to both process and product to reflect learners' actual abilities. In Bangladesh, traditional assessment practices remain largely exam-oriented, prioritizing memorization over communicative competence (Choudhury, 2001; Kabir, 2015).

Rahman and Pandian (2018) argue that despite curriculum reforms advocating communicative language teaching, assessment still relies on reproducing model essays and controlled tasks. This misalignment limits opportunities for authentic expression. Ali and Walker (2014) found that many teachers face challenges in implementing formative assessment due to insufficient training and large class sizes. These findings echo Hyland and Hyland's (2006) observation that contextual constraints often prevent teachers from giving constructive feedback.

Socio-cultural factors also influence writing assessment. Learners' first language and educational background shape their rhetorical patterns, sometimes leading to interference in English writing (Canagarajah, 2002). Studies have shown that examiners' judgments can be affected by factors unrelated to writing quality, such as handwriting and neatness (Shaw & Weir, 2007).

Large class sizes and heavy workloads further complicate assessment. Kabir (2015) reports that teachers often have limited time to mark scripts and provide meaningful feedback. Consequently, formative assessment practices such as peer review and portfolio assessment are rarely adopted. Ferris (2003) emphasizes that effective feedback is crucial to developing writing skills, yet in Bangladesh, feedback often focuses only on grammar correction.

Process-oriented assessment has been shown to enhance students' engagement and learning (Hamp-Lyons & Condon, 2000), but practical constraints in Bangladesh limit its implementation. Moreover, Rahman (2019) notes that teachers frequently lack access to clear rubrics and guidelines, which undermines the reliability and consistency of evaluation.

Recent studies advocate integrating technology to improve assessment and feedback (Hyland, 2016), though infrastructural limitations in many Bangladeshi schools remain a barrier.

1.10 Findings

- A significant proportion of secondary-level students demonstrated limited command of grammar, sentence construction, and vocabulary. Common errors included incorrect tense usage, subject-verb disagreement, and spelling mistakes. Writing coherence and paragraph development were weak among many students.

- Classroom practices and examinations heavily favored rote learning. Students frequently memorized model essays and paragraphs rather than learning to develop original content. This approach limited creativity and critical thinking in writing.
- Many English teachers lacked sufficient training in modern writing pedagogy. Teachers tended to prioritize textbook exercises and exam preparation over communicative and process-based writing approaches. There was limited use of formative assessment techniques to improve writing skills progressively.
- Classrooms were often overcrowded, with 50–70 students in a single section. Teachers faced time constraints that made individualized feedback on writing difficult. As a result, students rarely received constructive comments to improve their drafts.
- Schools often lacked adequate teaching aids, reference materials, and supplementary reading content. Limited access to libraries, digital tools, and authentic writing resources hindered skill development.
- Many students viewed English writing as a burdensome, exam-oriented subject. Fear of making mistakes led to reluctance in expressing ideas freely. Lack of motivation was compounded by insufficient encouragement or recognition of good writing.

1.11 Recommendations

1. Promote writing approaches that develop ideas, organization, and clarity rather than memorization.Enhance teacher training to build confidence and skills in teaching writing effectively. Use assessment methods that support learning over time, not just final exams.
2. Create classroom conditions that allow more personal attention and support for each student.Provide diverse materials and opportunities for students to engage with English beyond textbooks.
3. Encourage recognition and celebration of student efforts to build motivation and interest.Support activities and environments that increase real-life use of English.
4. Offer additional help and resources for students who face extra challenges due to their backgroundModernize curriculum and exams to better reflect real-world writing needs and skills.
5. Targeted support should be provided for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to reduce disparities in writing achievement.The curriculum and assessment systems should be updated to include authentic, communicative writing tasks aligned with practical language use.

1.12 Conclusion

The evaluation of English writing skills at the secondary level in Bangladesh remains a complex and multifaceted challenge. Despite the recognized importance of writing competence for academic success and future professional opportunities, assessment practices often fail to align with communicative and learner-centered approaches advocated in curriculum policies. This study highlights several critical issues, including the predominance of summative examinations, inadequate teacher training, large class sizes, and limited resources, all of which contribute to inconsistencies and shortcomings in writing evaluation.By examining teachers' perspectives, classroom practices, and the contextual factors that influence assessment, this research underscores the urgent need for reforms that prioritize validity, reliability, and the development of students' genuine writing abilities. Addressing these challenges will require targeted professional development for teachers, clearer assessment guidelines and rubrics, and policies that support formative, process-based approaches to writing evaluation.

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