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Research Paper

WRITING CHALLENGES IN THE EFL CONTEXT OF BANGLADESH

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Abstract

The paper aims at depicting the writing defies of secondary and higher secondary learners in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context of Bangladesh. Educational institutions now give importance to English writing skills. English is a compulsory subject in the secondary and higher secondary level in Bangladesh but students' English writing skill is still not satisfactory. The reason is that students do not try to understand grammatical rules and use these for making meaningful sentences. Instead, they tend to memorize some common questions or topics because exam questions are made, keeping common questions available in guide books. Teaching the writing niceties requires teaching by senior teachers with many years of English teaching experience, but there's a scarcity of senior teachers in universities. English class duration is also a factor here as in all the institutions; class duration is equal for all the subjects. All these factors make some long-standing challenges, which should be looked into and solved immediately.

Keywords: Writing challenges, EFL, secondary and higher secondary level

1. Introduction

Writing is one of the essential basic language skills to communicate with others. These days, people mostly give importance to speaking as we often need this skill. But besides speaking, achieving writing skills is also essential, especially in the academic field. There is no particular course for writing, but there's scope for teaching the paper in some introductory language courses. We start to learn the writing-related issues from the primary level as students have to submit a written script in the exam. But primary level education is not enough to enable a student to write different meaningful sentences in English, and students learn that from the secondary level. Writing English smartly like English-speaking people is underscored in the tertiary level, besides learning some grammatical rules. But students are far from achieving such expected writing skills, and now educational institutions are trying to find an effective solution. There's no gainsaying that solving existing challenges is not a matter of a day or two as these challenges have emerged for having many problems in language teaching. This study's main goal was to discover the problems of writing English among the learners of Bangladeshi schools and colleges.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Relation between Reading and Writing

The skill of writing is not an isolated skill that we can achieve without achieving some other related skills. A person who is not good at reading can't be good at writing as these two are

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interrelated. Her reading doesn't indicate bare reading without understanding anything. Instead, the reader must have the understanding capability, at least to a degree. Otherwise, he can't be considered a reader. Such understanding capability is also essential in writing as the writer has to create a complete concept in his mind at first. "It has become commonplace to characterize the act of writing as a meaning-making, purposeful, recursive, dialog, tentative, fluid, exploratory process. Recent research and theory in reading have shown us that these terms can be applied as well as to the act of reading, for like writing, reading is characterized by active engagement through which meaning is created" (Zamel, 1992: 463). To form a piece of writing the writer has to go through a complete process and Zamel (1992) said "a purposeful and exploratory process for the creation of meanings". So to complete the process, a person must have to have some skills. He has to create the idea in his mind, and then he'll be able to express that idea in his own words.

2.2. Applying Exact Words

To achieve the English writing skill, vocabulary must be enriched in all cases. Otherwise, he'll not be able to apply the right word depending on what he'll write. But, vocabulary acquisition is not easy work; as pointed out by (Suvin, 2020)- Vocabulary is an essential aspect of writing skills. The acquisition of vocabulary is an ongoing process requiring students' constant repetition and use of words to be effectively achieved in long-term memory. It is not sufficient to develop vocabulary by memorizing words from a list; for learners to acquire vocabulary, words must be learned as part of the context in which they occur." (Suvin, 2020, P. 68) When a student can accomplish such an acquisition process, that will be helpful for him not only to understand the meaning of the word and show him the correct context of using that word. Such an acquisition process may not be like the learning process of other theory courses where memorizing is the right learning way. Though enriching vocabulary requires studying, acquisition of vocabulary may not be easily possible without practicing. "Even though vocabulary acquisition is a learner-centered activity in regards to studying and being disciplined to set goals when done in collaboration with peers, students may enjoy the activity more, learning more vocabulary in the end." (Mehring, 2006, P. 4)

2.3. Impact of The Writing on The Reader's Mind

At the time of writing, a writer must be a reader besides being a writer. That means he has to think about what the reader will consider when reading the write-up. All the students should consider this issue when they write something as proposed by Paltridge and Starfield (2007)-

> Students can be asked to consider the relationship between their readers and themselves as writers and how this impacts what they say and how they can say it. They can also be asked to consider how this relationship changes for other academic texts such as research articles and conference presentations (Paltridge & Starfield, 2007, P. 5).

If the students write something without thinking about the impact to be created on the reader's mind, he will not be able to create a well-polished piece of writing. The writer aims to describe, narrate, prove, or show something. If he writes sentence after sentence without thinking about that impact, the writing will not be harmonious with what he wants to prove or describe. This process may take a bit more time, but it is a must if someone wants to engage the readers or write exactly what he wants to say.

2.4. Different Forms of Writing

Generally, a person is good at all the forms of language used in his mother language. But when it comes to a second language, he cannot write all types of sentences or expressions fluently. Suppose a skill may be needed to run effective communication, but that may be unimportant in other fields. Leki & Carson (1997) described this issue saying- "what is valued in writing for writing class is different from what is valued in writing for other academic courses." (Leki & Carson, 1997: 64). When we write about the legal procedure or using the process of a machine commonly, we don't use any exclamatory expressions, but using such an expression is a must in the case of writing about a tragic scene. Even in some cases, we don't need to use so many forms of sentences or different expressions. Opinion-based

assignments or essays report personal thoughts in the form of a simple discourse organization that usually meets the expectations of the genre (Hinkel, 2004: 12).

So, a student can be expert in opinion-based writing may not be like that in the case of story writing. The reason is that different requirements have to be fulfilled based on the nature of the writing. Being non-native in English, being an expert in all types of writing is tough. We can express ourselves exactly whatever we think in our mother language that's not possible in any other language like English. To say something in English, we have to think about sentence formation, grammar, the right words to apply, and the like as Kayum and Khan (2015) stated that vocabulary, structure, spelling, organization, linking expression, punctuation, paragraphing, style of language, presentation and coherence are some of the general skills which the learners require to develop in their writing.

2.5. Teacher's Role

The teacher's role is essential to develop writing skill as someone must point out what's needed to develop a writing style. And most importantly, understanding all the issues relating to the writing niceties is not possible at all by just reading books. Someone has to show the impact of using different synonymous words, the impact of different sentence formation styles, or the like. Rahman and Sarker (2019) pointed out such issues in an elaborate way-"Teachers need to execute different interactivities activities for making an English writing class more interactive instead of the rule-based and traditional approach. Effective teaching techniques like group work, pair work, crosschecking of each other copy, etc. effective must be used to develop students writing skill to a maximum level and manage a large classroom. Although it is tough to check every student's copies and give them individual feedback based on their needs for a large classroom, teachers can do a regular assessment and provide feedback weekly to minimize this issue" (Rahman, and Sarker, 2019, P. 13). It may take a longer period, but teaching the writing skill will not be effective without describing all these related issues. Checking the lacuna in a student's writing or examining the level of development is also an essential job of teachers in this regard. It is also to be mentioned that the role of teachers in teaching writing skill should not be the same for different levels. The reason is that secondary and higher secondary level students generally do not have enough mental capacity to understand complicated writing issues deeply. Khan and Maniam (2021) depicted that a teacher should make the students creative and imaginative about their daily lessons. So, the teachers can play a role to develop the students' skills with inspiration and necessary support.

3. Methodology

To conduct this study, the researcher has checked the scope of teaching writing skills in Bangladesh's primary, secondary, higher secondary, and higher educational levels. And to do that, the author has examined the English textbooks designed by NCTB for primary and secondary level. A secondary school class routine and a higher secondary college were the sample institutions for the study. The author dealt with the English class duration. English second paper questions of SSC-2017 and HSC-2018 have been considered to examine the standard of the question paper. The researcher also mentioned some data from Bangladesh Education Statistics 2017 to show the scarcity of senior teachers in universities.

4. Discussion and Findings

4.1. Developing Writing Skill in Different Education Levels

Writing instruction in Bangladesh begins in primary school. Khan et al. (2020) also mentioned that most students face difficulties in reading and writing. In Bangladesh, pupils must study one English book called "English for Today" in each of the five basic classes. Student investigates the meaning of popular phrases. Students also learn some essential communication phrases and their correct spelling. There are several brief dialogues in the class 5 book to teach pupils using communication terminology. The kids learn which words to write to communicate, but no grammatical principles are described. From Class 6, English language teaching is divided into two papers, teaching writing and maintaining grammar. The second English paper has two sections (Part

A and B), and this paper's questions reflect that. Part A features grammatical questions, whereas Part B requires students to compose an essay, paragraph, letter, etc. Writing a paragraph or a letter is also part of the English 1st paper. In SSC and HSC exams, this pattern is used from 6 to 10. Question makers construct difficult questions for higher levels and simple questions for lower courses on the same topic.

This type of composition writing might aid pupils if they write from their own point of view and not from a book. But a prevalent pattern is that question creators make questions that include common themes and ruin pupils' chances of memorizing. Writing a CV (No. 12), a paragraph on a rickshaw puller's life (No. 14), etc. Drafting an application to principal for raising book number in library (No. 13) and writing a paragraph on the value of female education (No. 15) are examples of 2018 HSC English second paper questions. Almost every guidebook or book, including composing chapters, has articles on these issues.

Although English is one of the most difficult topics for many Bangladeshi students, the class period for the first and second papers is the same. There are no extra English classes or extra English classes allotted in secondary and higher secondary institutions. Assume that starting in mid-2019, all secondary and higher secondary schools will provide online classes via "Zoom Cloud Meeting Apps." The class is too short, even if anyone can host a Zoom Meeting from anywhere.

The online class schedule of the Dhaka sample school shows that each session is allowed 35 minutes (beginning at 10:00 am, finishing at 12:35 pm) regardless of the subject. The college got 10 extra minutes. Flower, meaning 45 minutes here. Every day at this college, the first class is 10:00-10:45, and the last class is 01:00-01:45. Every course, including English. The class routines show that classes are quite short, not for Covid-19, but for secondary and higher secondary level institutions preceding Covid-19.

At the university level, professors can choose their own themes. However, most public and private colleges provide one or two English language courses for graduate students. Teachers in such English classes are free to develop students' writing skills. However, teachers frequently teach grammatical rules that students already know. So teaching writing skills at university isn't feasible.

Teaching writing entails knowing each student's strengths and weaknesses. That's a seasoned teacher with many years of expertise teaching English. However, according to the 2017 Bangladesh Education Statistics, only 2363 professors and 7842 lecturers teach in Bangladesh's 95 private universities. Also, many of these minor teachers are from public universities with little time for private college students.

Writing skills are improved by identifying and correcting errors. In practically all private universities, there are three semesters (4 months each), with mid-terms on the second and finals on the fourth. That implies a teacher has only a week or two to examine the answers before starting the next semester's class. Noting all errors in a student's answer script in such a short time is impossible. But in public universities, the situation is different because they use a 6-month semester or year structure. So a month for checking answer scripts is easily achievable.

4.2. Analysis of Current Context

In Bangladesh, students learn grammatical rules from the secondary level, but that doesn't mean primary-level English books are grammar-free. Instead, the primary level books don't contain such grammatical rules studying which a student can form full sentences in English. Students learn grammatical rules in the secondary and higher secondary level and use these rules to make sentences. But the class duration of all the classes is the same, from 45 minutes to 1 hour or so. It's just farcical that the time for teaching English language and other subjects like social science is the same, though, to be good at different subjects, different requirements must be fulfilled.

In the secondary and higher secondary level, English questions keep a good scope where students have to write a good number of sentences (especially in Part-B). But, the question pattern propels the students to memorise some paragraphs, essays, or so and make a good grade. The question paper makers design questions keeping some previous year common questions in there, and

that's why students memorize common things and get common in the question papers. If the situation isn't like this, students will have to write many sentences in English without memorizing.

At the higher education level, students ought to achieve more sophisticated writing skills and that requires deep understanding of some related issues. But in many universities, especially in private universities, there's acute scarcity of senior teachers and availability of lecturers. These junior teachers have only a few years of experience or no expertise in checking answer scripts. So commonly, it is hard for them to determine what the standard writing is or which problems may be in an answering script even if that script is free from grammatical error. And most importantly, whether a student can describe exactly or not what the student wanted to describe. To achieve this sense it is required to check the writing of the answer script for a good many years. He has to take a repeated look at the answer to the same question by different students. After doing so, he'll understand which one is excellent and how to develop other students' writing who couldn't meet the criteria. And all these things can't be possible in only a few days so time is a factor here.

4.3. Key Findings

a) Primary level students get familiar with some common words, and from the secondary level, writing skills become essential. Students learn how to write meaningful sentences from the secondary level as they learn grammatical rules and the correct use of words in a sentence. But class duration for all the subjects are the same though students are not equally weak in all the subjects.

b) Students have to write different paragraphs essays in the secondary and higher secondary level, and all these can develop students' writing skills. But making the students skillful through these questions are really challenging because same type of questions are in question papers over the years. That's why without trying to develop writing skill, students memorise some common questions.

c) In higher educational level, scope for teaching writing skills is very limited as students become busy with major courses based on their taken subject. Writing qualifications become less important in such major courses because having some key information in the answer script gets important there.

d) Senior teacher can determine the loopholes in a student's writing that are not equally possible in the case of a junior teacher. But there's a scarcity of senior teachers in universities, which is more acute in private universities. And in private universities, teachers get only a few days to check answer scripts and give numbers due to the four months semester system.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Indeed, there are still many problems in language teaching and solution of all these isn't possible overnight. It is accepted by all that there's not enough scope of teaching the writing skill in Bangladesh language teaching. But if we can utilize the limited scope properly, developing students' writing skills will not be challenging. Adopting the following measures must be helpful to overcome the existing challenges.

a. Question makers should not include any previous year questions in secondary and higher secondary level English questions as this will propel students to memorize guidebooks.

b. Obviously, it is obvious to increase the English class duration in all schools and colleges. It can't be less than one and a half hours, and in English class, teaching "how to write different types of sentences in English" should be mandatory.

c. In the composition part of secondary and higher secondary level questions, there must be questions on such a topic that the students become bound to write something without memorizing.

d. It may be made mandatory to take note of the English writing-related loopholes existing in each student's answer scripts and discuss those in class. If we can apply this system effectively, that will be helpful for students to identify their shortcomings.

e. Universities must engage senior teachers like Associate Professor or Professor in English language courses. A teacher's experience in English teaching is also to be taken into account before engaging him in an English language course.
f. Providing less than one month to check the student's answer script isn't fair. So universities should not allow teachers to submit mark sheets or checked answer scripts without properly marking the writing-related loopholes.

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