

Challenges of Effective English Writing for Bangladeshi Tertiary-level Students

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Abstract

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) writing skills are crucial for Bangladeshi tertiary students' academic success, career advancement, and global participation, but studies show significant hurdles exist in their acquisition. This mixed-method study explores the challenges in English language writing skills among undergraduate students at a Bangladeshi university. A 3-point Likert scale student questionnaire with 18 questions divided into three categories of challenges — language proficiency challenges, motivational and external challenges, and learning support challenges — was the instrument used to collect quantitative data. Semi-structured interviews among faculty members provided faculty perceptions of the challenges undergraduate students face in English writing.

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The quantitative data collected from 300 student participants and the interview data from 15 faculty members highlight challenges with motivation, concept structure, grammar, and resource constraints. The insights from the study are pivotal for ensuring appropriate pedagogical, psychological, and other measures in enhancing their EFL writing skills.

Introduction

Background of the study

It is well-established in the literature that, in this globalized world where English serves as the lingua franca and the most dominant language, effective communication in English is the cornerstone of academic and professional success (Chowdhury & Haider, 2012; Johnson & Rulo, 2019; Kaur et al., 2019; Marsen, 2020). With strong English writing ability, students can articulate their ideas clearly and persuasively, analyze and synthesize information, and demonstrate critical thinking abilities. All these skills are essential for their success in answering examination questions, writing assignments, essays, research papers, and drafting presentations. In the professional world, English writing skills are equally valuable, because from crafting compelling emails and reports to drafting persuasive proposals and presentations, strong English writing skills are crucial for career advancement.

English writing proficiency at tertiary level education

English writing proficiency is an essential component of tertiary-level students, just as it is at all other educational levels, particularly in today's globalized world. For the tertiary-level students, developing strong English writing skills is crucial for academic achievement, professional advancement, and personal fulfillment (Johnson & Rulo, 2019; Kaur et al., 2019; Marsen, 2020). It also enables them to navigate the complexities of a world interconnected by language and communication.

Challenges in English writing proficiency of Bangladeshi tertiary-level students

Acquiring English proficiency, especially in writing, presents substantial hurdles for Bangladeshi learners (Afrin, 2016; Biswas, 2021; Patwary et al., 2023). Unfortunately, a growing body of evidence suggests that, in most cases, Bangladeshi tertiary-level students fail to demonstrate the expected level of proficiency in English, especially in writing (Karim, Maasum, & Latif, 2017; Patwary & Sajib, 2018). Research uncovers that the majority of our students find it difficult to demonstrate their skills in aspects like grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, and overall linguistic competence. In another key, students in our EFL context also face obstacles related to their intrinsic motivation and other similar challenges, which include the lack of proper learning environment or societal pressures affecting their motivation. Analysis of data from multiple studies reveals another important type of hurdle for EFL/ESL learners. This includes their challenges related to the support systems available for developing writing skills. For example: deficiencies in educational resources, inadequate guidance from teachers, or limited access to writing support services, etc.

Research into EFL writing has identified three broad categories of challenges that learners face: language-related difficulties, motivational and external factors, as well as difficulties with the support structures provided for their learning.

However, existing literature lacks an inclusive analysis of Bangladeshi students' writing difficulties combining all the three categories of challenges mentioned above.

Research Objectives and Research Questions

With the primary objective to investigate the challenges faced by Bangladeshi university students in their English writing, our research combines the three key areas of challenges highlighted by the existing literature - language proficiency challenges, motivational and external barriers, and learning support challenges. The following three research questions guide our study:

1. How do language proficiency challenges affect the writing skills of tertiary-level Bangladeshi EFL learners?
2. How do motivational and external challenges influence the writing performance of tertiary-level Bangladeshi EFL learners?
3. To what extent do learning support challenges contribute to the writing difficulties experienced by tertiary-level Bangladeshi EFL learners?



Theoretical Framework

Figure 1: Theoretical background

This study utilized a comprehensive theoretical framework to explore specific research questions. As shown in Figure 1, the perspectives from Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics are used to address the 1st research question of the study regarding Language Proficiency Challenges. Input Hypothesis posits that language acquisition occurs most effectively when learners are exposed to "comprehensible input" (Gong, 2023). This theory helps in explaining the role of grammar, vocabulary, and language mechanics in writing proficiency. Moreover, Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics framework focuses on how linguistic choices in writing (e.g., grammar and syntax) contribute to textual functions and meanings to explain how language proficiency challenges affect writing quality.

Similarly, Decy and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Eccles and Wigfield's Expectancy-Value Theory help to address the 2nd research question regarding Motivational and External Challenges. Self-determination theory explains how a lack of motivation, fear of mistakes, and external factors like time constraints and distractions impact students' engagement in writing (Ryan, 2017). Additionally, the Expectancy-Value theory focuses on how students' beliefs about their capabilities (self-efficacy) and the value they place on a task affect their motivation (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000).

Finally, to guide the 3rd research question regarding Learning Support Challenges, the study employed Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Zone of Proximal Development. Sociocultural Theory emphasizes the role of social interaction and scaffolding in learning (Marginson & Dang, 2017). It is applied to understand how learning support, such as teacher support, clear assessment criteria, feedback, and instructional methods, influence the development of writing skills. Zone of Proximal Development helps us explain how effective learning support can bridge the gap between the students' current writing skills and their potential (Nicholas, Veresov & Clark, 2021).

This theoretical framework integrates multiple theories and models to comprehensively investigate the three research questions.

Methods

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-method research design for a comprehensive understanding and cross-validation of findings. Mixed-method research, as defined by Creswell and Clark (2017), is an approach that systematically integrates quantitative and qualitative data within a single study. This integration allows researchers to gain a thorough understanding of a research problem by drawing on the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods. Mixed-method studies can be particularly useful when the research question is complex or when there is a need to understand both the breadth and depth of a phenomenon.

Creswell and Clark (2017) identify three main types of mixed-method designs: concurrent, sequential, and transformative. Concurrent designs involve collecting both quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, while sequential designs involve collecting one type of data followed by the other. Transformative designs use the iterative process of collecting and analyzing data to inform the development of new research questions.

Mixed-method studies can be challenging to conduct as they involve collection of both qualitative and quantitative data and their analyses, but they can also provide valuable insights that would not be possible with either quantitative or qualitative methods alone. Our decision to use mixed-method design depended on its potential for more comprehensive findings based on the specific research questions.

Quantitative Instrument

The study employed a survey questionnaire among EFL students at a university in Bangladesh. The survey questionnaire focused on three categories of challenges faced by EFL students, with each category containing six questions rated on a 3-point Likert scale ranging from disagree to agree (Appendix – A). This approach enabled us to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by EFL students from a quantitative perspective. The researchers carefully planned, designed, and ensured expert evaluation to ensure the reliability and validity of the survey questionnaire. It was prepared to measure language proficiency challenges, motivational and external barriers, and learning support challenges – the three categories of challenges using multiple related questions. The draft questionnaire was revised repeatedly to ensure simple and unambiguous language for easy and similar interpretation of the questions by all respondents. The primary draft was sent to an expert ELT practitioner for review to evaluate the clarity and coherence of language as well as alignment with the theoretical frameworks. Necessary modifications were made based on the feedback.

The Participants

The participants of the study included randomly selected 300 students of BA (Honors) in English Language and Literature at a Bangladeshi university. Detailed demographic information of the respondents is presented in the Finding section.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed to identify patterns and trends in the challenges faced by the students. Descriptive measurements were used to summarize the responses, offering insights into the frequency and intensity of each challenge category. The quantitative findings enabled a deeper exploration of the issues through faculty interviews.

Qualitative Instrument

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Seven open-ended questions served as the primary framework for the interviews (Appendix – B). The interview questions were connected to the key concepts being investigated: language proficiency challenges, motivational and external challenges, and learning support challenges, aligning with the categories addressed in the student questionnaire. The questions addressed common grammar and syntax issues, mechanics and organization, cultural and contextual influences, revision habits, motivational factors, teaching methods, and the sufficiency of curriculum and resources for writing development. This part of the study provided in-depth insights into issues identified in the quantitative phase.

The Participants

The 15 interview participants were purposefully selected from among experienced English language faculty members teaching undergraduate students at the university. These faculty members were chosen based on their extensive engagement with students' writing and their

ability to provide informed perspectives on writing challenges and instructional strategies.

Data Collection

Each interview lasted between 25 and 35 minutes and was conducted either virtually or face-to-face, based on participants' availability and preferences. All interviews were recorded (with consent) to ensure accurate data transcription and analysis. The transcription of the interview data was made verbatim, and each interview contained 2500 to 3000 words.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and themes within the qualitative data. The analysis followed a systematic process: (a) Transcribing the interviews verbatim, (b) Familiarizing with the data through repeated reading, (c) Coding segments of text relevant to the research objectives, (d) Organizing codes into broader themes corresponding to the categories of challenges identified in the study (language proficiency, motivational and external factors, and learning support).

Findings and Discussion

Findings from Quantitative Data

Year	Male	Female	Total
1 st	30	40	70

2 nd	40	100	140
3 rd	40	50	90

Demographic Information

Figure 2: Demographic Information

Our study involved quantitative responses from 300 tertiary EFL students, 110 males and 190 females, who are pursuing a BA (Honors) in English Language and Literature degree at a Bangladeshi university. All the participants completed their 13 years of schooling in Bangla as a medium. At the time of the research, the students were enrolled in their first, second, and third academic years. Their responses revealed an array of challenges that are highly likely to affect their writing skills, ranging from language proficiency challenges to motivational and external challenges to learning support challenges.

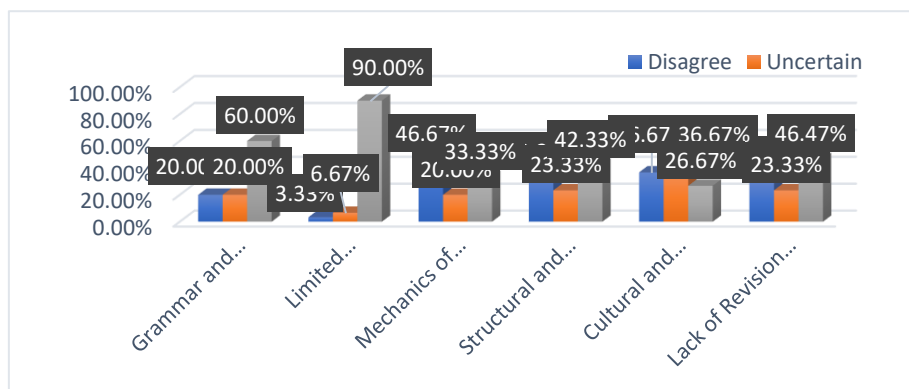
Language Proficiency Challenges

Figure 3: Language Proficiency Challenges

The figure above demonstrates that 90% of the students largely agreed that having a limited vocabulary was a prevalent challenge for them. On the other hand, 46.67% of the students' strong disagreement with the mechanics of writing issues implies that they perceive that they find relatively little hurdle in that aspect while assigned to any writing task. The students face difficulty in writing sentences with cohesion and coherence since 42.33% of the students agreed that they have structural and organizational problems.

Motivational and External Challenges

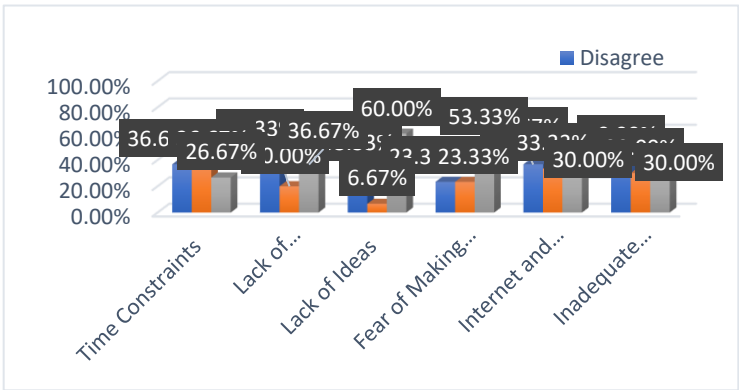


Figure 4: Motivational and External Challenges

The above figure shows that 60% of the students agreed that they have difficulty in generating and working with ideas, important to produce an error-free writing. On the other hand, while 42.33 % of the students disagreed in the case of lacking motivation, 53.33% of the students agreed that in the case of fear of making mistakes which is believed to affect their intrinsic motivation to a great extent.

Learning Support Challenges

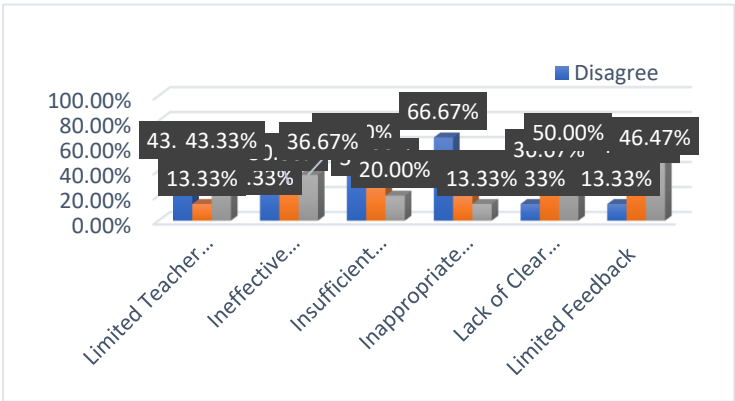


Figure 5: Learning Support Challenges

The above figure illustrates that 66.67% of the students disagreed that the inappropriate topic selection is a considerable challenge for them. However, 50% of the students have a lack of clear assessment criteria and rubrics challenging for them under the criteria of learning support challenge.

Summary of Key Findings from Quantitative Data

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners face a multitude of challenges when it comes to writing, ranging from linguistic barriers to motivational hurdles and inadequate learning support. The most prevalent linguistic challenges stem from limited vocabulary (90%) and difficulties with grammar and syntax (60%). These linguistic limitations hinder EFL learners' ability to effectively express their thoughts and ideas in written form.

Motivational and external factors also pose significant challenges for EFL writers. A lack of ideas (60%) and a fear of making mistakes (53%) often lead to procrastination, writer's block, and a reluctance to engage in the writing process. These motivational barriers can be further exacerbated by external factors such as limited opportunities to practice writing and a lack of exposure to authentic written English.

Compounding these challenges is a lack of adequate learning support. Many EFL learners struggle with unclear assessment criteria (50%) and limited feedback (46%), making it difficult for them to identify their strengths and weaknesses and develop their writing skills effectively. Without clear guidance and support, EFL writers may feel lost and discouraged, further hindering their progress.

Findings from Qualitative Data

Based on the data collected from the semi-structured interviews with 15 EFL teachers of the same university, several key findings emerged regarding students' writing challenges. These findings illustrate the common issues faced by students in grammar, mechanics, revision practices, and the influence of cultural and contextual factors.

Grammar and Syntax Issues

Teachers frequently noted issues with subject-verb agreement and tense, with respondents frequently pointing out mistakes in these areas. For example, one teacher observed, "Students tend to make a lot of errors in subject-verb agreement and tense. They also struggle to identify the parts of speech of a sentence" (Respondent 2). Another common issue was the use of complex sentence structures, often leading to fragments or run-on sentences. This was highlighted by a teacher who noted, "Constructing complex sentences and correct use of tense are the major issues that students make mistakes in writing" (Respondent 4).

Mechanics and Organization of Ideas

The data revealed that students often struggle with punctuation and spelling. Mistakes in punctuation, particularly misplaced commas and incorrect use of quotation marks, were frequently noted. One teacher remarked, "Misuse of commas is a very common mistake. They have no clear idea about quotation marks" (Respondent 14). Additionally, teachers highlighted issues with organization of ideas, noting that students often failed to build a coherent system of argumentation in their writing. A respondent mentioned, "Students struggle to build a system of ideas where one idea logically leads to the next in an augmentative fashion" (Respondent 9).

Cultural and Contextual Influences

The analysis suggested that cultural and contextual factors significantly impact students' writing. Teachers noted that students' writing often reflects the influences of their native language and cultural norms. For example, one teacher stated, "Students find it difficult to address concepts that are not common in their culture and therefore struggle in expressing them in their writing" (Respondent 3). This was echoed by another teacher who observed, "Students in Bangladesh have limited opportunities to speak in English. Speaking activities improve fluency and accuracy, which are essential for writing" (Respondent 15).

Revision Practices and Motivation

Revision was identified as a critical area where students faced challenges. Many teachers noted that students often do not revise their work sufficiently, leading to incomplete or poorly developed ideas. A respondent explained, "Mostly I get assignments which read like the first draft but full of

potential to be an excellent writing upon a few revisions" (Respondent 1). Fear of mistakes and distractions, such as social media, also influenced students' willingness to revise their work. As one teacher noted, "Students often procrastinate finishing their tasks due to the fear of making mistakes" (Respondent 12).

Teaching Methods and Feedback

The way teachers approach feedback and their teaching methods were found to significantly influence students' writing development. Teachers who employed interactive and dialogic methods reported better student engagement and improvement in writing. A respondent explained, "I encourage group discussions followed by some writing on their observations and open dialogue among students where they can comment on others' positions" (Respondent 6). However, inadequate feedback was noted as a barrier to improvement, with one teacher stating, "Students are not motivated to rework something they have 'finished' because they don't experience the joy of seeing having improved between the first draft and a well-refined version" (Respondent 1).

Curriculum and Resources

The sufficiency of the curriculum and resources available for writing development was questioned by several teachers. While there was agreement that the curriculum provided a good foundation in grammar and basic writing skills, many felt it lacked depth and practical application. As one teacher noted, "The curriculum and resources provide little support for developing students' writing" (Respondent 7). This sentiment was echoed by another

teacher who mentioned, "The class size makes it difficult for writing development with the current curriculum and resources. More time dedicated to writing in the classroom will help" (Respondent 5).

Discussion

Based on the findings from both the quantitative and qualitative data, several key areas are highlighted for addressing the writing challenges faced by EFL learners, particularly in the Bangladeshi context.

The quantitative data reveals that EFL learners struggle with significant linguistic barriers, primarily due to limited vocabulary and difficulties with grammar and syntax, which impede their ability to clearly express themselves in writing. Motivational and external factors also play a crucial role, with a lack of ideas and fear of mistakes leading to procrastination and reluctance to engage in writing activities. Additionally, inadequate learning support—such as unclear assessment criteria and limited feedback—hinders the development of writing skills, leaving learners feeling unsupported and unconfident.

The qualitative data complements these findings by emphasizing the need for a more holistic approach to teaching writing. Effective strategies must include targeted interventions such as enhanced feedback mechanisms, comprehensive assessment criteria, and a curriculum that integrates extensive reading and writing practice. By addressing these challenges through a multifaceted strategy, EFL students can overcome their difficulties, gain confidence in their writing abilities, and ultimately improve

their academic and personal writing skills. This approach not only supports linguistic development but also motivates learners by providing the necessary tools and encouragement to succeed in their writing journey.

Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, our study shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced by Bangladeshi tertiary-level students in English writing. The identified challenges encompass language proficiency hurdles, motivational and external factors, and issues related to learning support. Understanding these challenges is pivotal for the enhancement of English writing skills among Bangladeshi students.

Addressing these challenges is essential for the improvement of English writing outcomes. Educators need to consider adopting a holistic approach that not only focuses on linguistic aspects but also considers motivational factors and external influences.

Curriculum developer can play a significant role by offering targeted support for individual needs and incorporating technology to provide additional resources. A well-rounded curriculum should not only enhance language proficiency but also foster intrinsic motivation and resilience in students, preparing them for the demands of academic and professional writing.

Areas for Further Investigation

While our study provided valuable insights, further investigation is needed to delve deeper into specific aspects. Future research could explore the effectiveness of specific pedagogical strategies in addressing language proficiency challenges. Additionally, investigating the impact of learning support structures, such as peer tutoring or writing centers, on student writing outcomes would contribute to refining support systems. Furthermore, examining the role of technology, including online writing platforms and feedback tools, in mitigating writing challenges warrants exploration.

In summary, this study underscores the importance of appropriate strategies in addressing the challenges faced by Bangladeshi tertiary-level students in English writing. By implementing targeted teaching practices and refining the curriculum, educators can create an environment conducive to fostering proficient and motivated writers.

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