Students' Perception on High-stakes English Language Testing in
Bangladesh: Expectations vs Reality

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our own original work while completing degree at Brac University.

2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.

3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.

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Approval

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Ethics Statement

I, Rafsana Amin, testify that all the works included in this dissertation are original work resulting from my own knowledge and interest. Information mentioned from other academic journals, books and materials used in this research has been acknowledged properly. While gathering data from the participants for this research, I followed all the ethical considerations. I, hereby, proclaim that I have not submitted this research work, neither as a whole or a chapter, formerly or parallelly in this or any other university.

Abstract

This study critically examines students' perception on high-stakes English language testing in Bangladesh. Every year thousands of students in their Primary, Junior Secondary, Secondary and Higher Secondary level, attend high-stakes tests whose results play a significant role in shaping their future. Even though these tests are a common phenomenon in Bangladeshi society, not enough research is done to investigate how the students are viewing these tests, how much mental pressure they are facing while attempting to meet up the expectations of society and parents relating to these tests results. Hence, this study specifically addresses students' voice and experiences to examine how high-stakes English language tests are helping to develop students' language skills. This is a qualitative study and the participants are some of the higher secondary level students. Data for this study were mainly collected through interviews and analysed thematically. The conclusion drawn from students' responses suggested that there lies a wide range of mismatch between the curriculum and assessment practices which is resulted due to lack of efficient teachers having enough pedagogic literacy, lacking in providing enough facilities and resources to facilitate successful English language teaching and testing. Yet, attempts are being made to overcome those challenges so that quality education can be ensured. By highlighting the students' perspective in this study, the researcher provides a picture of the drawbacks of current English language testing so that necessary steps can be taken to overcome the challenges.

Keywords: High-stakes testing; Curriculum; Pandemic; Online-assessment

Dedication

 I would like to dedicate my work to all the children who are bestowed by the Almighty with the ability to do all the creative things that makes each of them special in their own way.

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Table of Contents

x

Chapter 1

Introduction

Testing is considered one of the basic components and cornerstone of a curriculum and educational system as it keeps other educational factors constantly engaged, while ensuring quality education of the learners. In a word, without an appropriate and well-organized testing and assessment policy, the base of quality education cannot develop. The necessity and significance of a well-organized and stable assessment system has been further emphasized by Davison & Leung (2009) where they stated testing and learning as two interconnected factors. Besides addressing the usual aims of traditional testing system (for instance, acknowledging the amount of learning objectives achieved by the learners, or to what extent the examinees can interiorize those learning objectives); it is also executed to find out the lacking and requirements that are needed to be addressed in order to ensure better learning of students.

As defined by Spring (2004), high-stakes testing "refers to an examination that determines a person's future academic career and job opportunities" (p.36). Additionally, it was also stated by Crawford and Impara (2001) that whenever any examination has a significant impact on the lives of the students, it will be considered as high-stakes tests. However, educational researchers view high-stakes tests as those that critically influence educational programs, curriculum as students' achievements in these tests mirrors the whole educational system. High stakes testing is a common phenomenon in the South Asian countries like Bangladesh which are intended to assess students' acquired knowledge and skills in respective subjects. However, at present these tests take a heavy toll on students by developing various societal and educational expectations. In Bangladesh, these tests are considered a medium through which every year millions of test takers' fate gets decided be it in educational or job field (M.M., Ali, et al., 2020). Besides the institution-based tests that are taken at each

term's ending, the students of this nation need to take part in four public examinations at the end of their Primary, Junior Secondary, Secondary and Higher Secondary level. These public examinations and their outcomes play a huge role in a student's life because the grades received by him decide which background he will get to choose for further studies, which college will accept his application or whether he will be getting the government's stipends. Hence, it is the responsibility of the policy makers and educators to ensure that a clear framework is followed by educators to plan these tests so that quality education can be ensured which learners can implement in practical life successfully.

1.1. Research Context

In Bangladesh, all the participants attending high-stakes examinations are expected to maintain certain social and educational expectations which takes a heavy toll on them, as these examinations have become more like a ritual and a means of social celebrations than being just the ways of testing students' knowledge and skills in specific areas. Therefore, the students go through a series of preparations to participate in these exams and achieve a good result depending upon which their whole future takes a shape. The educational board and the present English curriculum of NCTB (National Curriculum Textbook Board) has stressed upon making the students competent in all the four skills of language (e.g., reading, writing, speaking and listening) in case of designing the textbooks and curriculum. However, the question arises whether proper measures have been taken by the authorities to design the testing procedure or not as these tests are the only way of assessing learners' development of knowledge and skills which would further clarify if NCTB's goals of making the students capable for real life communication in English has been accomplished or not. The Higher Secondary Level students of Bangladesh are the ones who are preparing themselves to pursue their higher education after passing the H.S.C examinations. In terms of experience, they are the ones who have already taken part in 3 public examinations and can provide a better voice to address the issues related

to the assessment system of Bangladesh. Unless students' perspective and their goals of participating in these examinations are highlighted, it will not be possible to interpret the validity of these high-stakes English language tests that are held nationwide each year. Therefore, by interpreting students' viewpoint on the impact of these tests and assessment, preparation process and how it shapes their learning objectives, this study critically comments on the validity and appropriateness of high-stakes English language testing of Higher Secondary level in Bangladesh.

1.2 Overview of English Language Testing in Bangladesh

The examination system of Bangladesh is completely pen and paper based where questions are designed based on the contents taught in classroom and students are assessed dependent upon the score they earn in these tests. As stated by Mohamed et.al., (2006), while evaluating student's knowledge through tests, preference is given more on the concepts discussed in class rather than evaluating the students' ability of implementing that knowledge in practical life. It is very unfortunate to learn that the tests whose result on which the participants' higher education choices and preferences depend completely, does not evaluate their capability of implementing those knowledge and skills in practical life. Das, et.al., (2014) has also discussed how these high-stakes tests only evaluate students' memorization skills and their capability of reciting the memorized information in the test scripts.

Lack of expertise in English language among people of Bangladesh was documented in the EF English Proficiency Index in 2019 where among the five proficiency measuring levels, Bangladesh was positioned as a country with low level proficiency in English (Education First, 2019). As Hamid, Jahan and Islam (2013) stated, the quality of English language education can be further evaluated when we will see a postgraduate student struggling to articulate speech in English language in a decent manner. Even though the higher secondary

English curriculum endorsed learner-centered approach with an aim of developing students' communicative competence (National Curriculum, 2012) to align with National Education Policy (Ministry of Education, 2010), there lies a great amount of mismatch between the curriculum goals and the way students are being tested and assessed. The primary agenda mentioned in the curriculum is to provide necessary guidance to develop all the four language skills (e.g., reading, writing, listening and speaking).

This implies that instead of focusing on grammar-based language instructions, teachers should adopt a skill-based approach so that learners are able to practice and acquire all the language skills to use them in practical life. In order to implement the CLT method successfully in the classroom, textbooks were also being designed and published for the learners. Yet, there are many existing literature whose findings have reported about how the English language teaching and learning has failed devastatingly where ineffective testing and assessment methods were considered a huge contributor in this regard (Ali, Hamid, & Hardy, 2020; Ali & Walker, 2014). This is because English language testing in Bangladesh is still largely grounded on evaluating students' memorization and conceptualization capabilities. According to Ali, Hamid & Hardy (2020), higher secondary level students attend 3 types of tests and assessment e.g., continuous assessment, internal and public examination (p.538). Where continuous assessments are taken via class tests and homework and internal examinations are organized individually by the institutions to check students' progress, public examinations are taken following the guidelines given by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB).

Despite the curriculum stressed upon the need of developing all the four language skills, examinations are designed in a way where only reading and writing skills are assessed while the listening and speaking skills are not even taught formally. According to Begum and Farooqui (2008), along with major barriers like lack of proper facilities in the classrooms, huge number of students, duration of class; inadequacy of trained teachers is the main reason behind

this failure of implementing CLT approach and suitable testing and assessment. Most of the teachers are still following the grammar translation method that only focuses on the contents mentioned in the syllabus where the goal is to gain a higher score in exams. There is no opportunity given to the students to practice creative writing, rather they are provided with a set of questions related to the contents of the syllabus and expected to write according to given instructions so that they can pass or gain highest marks. Additionally, Stiggins (2002) asserted that majority of the teachers are not prepared to confront the challenges of testing the development English language skills in the classrooms as they have little or no training for conducting successful English language tests. English in Action (2010), a language development project operating in Bangladesh, stated that the majority of secondary English teachers do not have appropriate amount of proficiency in English and carry limited skills and understanding to maintain classroom communication in English. Thus, it becomes more difficult to introduce alternative testing and assessments processes that can help the learners develop their English language skills.

At present these public examinations take a heavy toll on students by developing various societal and educational expectations. Since these public examinations put a lot at stake for the students, it is necessary to acknowledge the outcomes they are getting by participating in these examinations. Since the real motive behind introducing testing and assessment is to detect the level of development gained by the learners in their respective fields, it is significant to investigate the student's interpretation regarding the design, planning and pattern of these national examinations. Their viewpoint is necessary to interpret the validity of the assessment system of Bangladesh, since at the end of the day they are the ones who takes part in these tests which further shapes their future. Therefore, an investigation of their experiences regarding the preparation, learning and everything taught by the teacher in their respective institutions, along

with their expectations from these tests need to be recorded to evaluate the validity and reliability of such examinations.

1.3. High-Stakes Tests During COVID-19 Pandemic

The sudden arrival of novel coronavirus as a global pandemic in the beginning of 2020 worldwide, not only brought an immense number of changes in the social and economic sector, but also transformed the whole medium of education. Since maintaining social distance was the only way to stop the spread of COVID-19, all the educational and professional sectors were shut down and soon the medium of transaction and other activities became online based. Similarly, the majority of educational institutions in Bangladesh adopted online education to keep the classes and other activities going. This sudden transformation pushed the educators and policy makers to come up with different effective ways of taking online classes and assessments to ensure the quality education. Since the country has always been dependent upon the traditional pen and paper-based teaching and assessment system, implementing online methods in an organized and most successful way has been a challenge from the very beginning.

Initially, when the ministry of education declared to resume all the academic activities via online, the main focus was to start taking classes online using various free cloud platforms like Google meet, Zoom, Google Classroom, Facebook etc. However, as the corona situation deteriorated and the closure of institutions extended, many of the institutions decided to take tests and assessments to evaluate students' level of understanding on the topics taught online. Although online-based education is prevalent all over the West, its frequency is finite in the East, especially in a developing country like Bangladesh for many reasons of which poor internet connection is the most important one. Additionally, the country's education system is always following the traditional teaching and learning method, most of the teachers do not hold

6

enough technological knowledge using which online classes can be taken without any hindrance. Also, considering the financial condition of the people in this country, not all the students have the ability to buy the devices needed for joining online classes. In such a situation ensuring 100% participation in online classes as well as assessment becomes really challenging. Furthermore, ensuring honesty and integrity in case of online assessment is another significant matter to consider in order to ensure that all the students are being judged based on their authenticity. However, these issues concerning successful implementation of online teaching and learning are yet to be solved by educators and policy makers. As a result, in the year 2020 all the high-stakes tests that used to be held nation-wide did not take place. All the students were auto-passed based on their previous examination performance. In fact, at present too, there lies a great amount of doubt whether the public examinations will take place or not. All of these together has raised a great amount of concern among parents, teachers and students regarding the future of the students as everything is unsure. Hence, the students' experiences and viewpoints regarding these tests need to be documented so that proper planning can be done and implemented for their best interest.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter covers the literature review which includes the position and contribution of high-stakes English language testing in developing learners' competency in using English language for communication. Moreover, it also discusses the modifications done in Bangladesh in case of English language teaching and testing. Overall, this section presents a picture on the ongoing debate provided by the researcher regarding the issues of English language testing in Bangladesh including online testing too which might be influencing the learners' perception on learning objectives to a great extent.

2.1. High-stakes Testing and English Language Test Design

As described by Loschert (2000), high-stakes tests are a form of assessment which holds students, teachers, administration and the entire system of educational institutions accountable for a student's performance (p. 1). These tests are a medium for the educational institutions for making high-stakes decisions therefore they are often considered standardized assessments. In this regard, the public examinations (for instance, JSC, SSC, HSC) in Bangladesh designed by the educational board fall under standardized assessments because the score of these tests ascertains which curricular track the students will get to choose, which college they will join and whether they will be able to graduate or not.

Even though language testing was thought secondary to teaching earlier, at present many educators consider language tests as a medium that establishes pedagogy and its consequences (M. M., Ali, et al., 2020). Hence, Cheng and Curtis (2004) mentioned that tests are "no longer an obedient servant" rather they are "a leader" of pedagogy (p.11). Andrews (2004) asserted "it is precisely the power of high-stakes tests…that makes them potentially so influential upon the curriculum and curriculum innovation" (p.37). Considering the influence

of tests and their influence, critical language testing scholar debate that high-stakes tests require proper investigation so that "the uses, or misuses and consequences of tests in education and society" (Shohamy, 2016, p.1) are known. Additionally, designing a language test is sophisticated process that includes theoretical, professional, ethical and pragmatic factors need to considered (Hughes, 2003). Hence, before planning a language test, the purpose, aims and objectives need to be cleared so that it proves to be helpful for the test-takers. In Bangladesh, high-stakes tests like JSC, SSC, HSC have been taking place for many years which includes English too. Yet, there has not been appropriate research conducted to investigate the test design, rationales behind it let alone interpreting its validation (M. M., Ali, et al., 2020). Each year the participants of these tests go through a series of stress both physically and mentally while taking preparations, however, regret lies upon the fact that very little awareness lies among the authorities to investigate the learning outcomes of these high-stakes tests whose results determine the fates of millions of students in this country.

2.2. The Need of Amending the High-Stakes English Language Testing in Bangladesh

English being the global language for its widespread popularity and acceptance has eventually become the fundamental medium of communication worldwide. Therefore, keeping its economic values in mind, the government of Bangladesh like many other developing countries made huge funding to rehabilitate the education of English language (Littlewood, 2007) so that the learners become competent to use this language for real life communication. This prioritization of English language education in countries like Bangladesh whose population does not use this language for speaking has been termed as reformation in the field of ELT (Waters, 2009). He also highlighted the development of an improvised English language curriculum which included newly designed materials and instructions for the teachers to follow. Therefore, it was argued by Nunan (2003) also that the widespread popularity of

English language has made a positive significant impact on the educational curriculum and practices in the Asia- Pacific region. He also highlighted the introduction of the CLT approach in the ELT curriculum of these countries which puts emphasis on the meaningful communication and interaction between the teacher and students, completely opposite to GTM.

Similarly, like other neighboring countries the government modified its decision and CLT was introduced in this region during the late 90s with an agenda to increase people's overall competency level in English language (Farooqui, 2008, p.192). Kabir (2015) highlighting the development of National Textbook Board (NCTB) asserted that realizing the importance of increasing the communicative competence of the learners in English, CLT was implemented by the Ministry of Education (MoE) in Primary, Secondary and Higher Secondary levels. However, it soon came to their realization that only introducing CLT in the pedagogical setting is not sufficient to ensure the effective learning of this language. Hence, the reformation of the curriculum included instructions on preparing suitable teaching materials following the principles of CLT, arranging training for teachers along with changing the examination system (Haidar & Chowdhury, 2012, p.12). Therefore, the new textbook English for Today for class IX-X claimed its objectives "to help students attain competency in all four skills, e.g., listening, speaking, reading and writing" (Kabir, 2015). Yet, as Hamid & Baldauf (2008) stated, to what extent such reforms and introduction of new materials ensure successful implementation of CLT and enhance learners' language competence in English is still debatable. Therefore Das, et.al. (2014) emphasized upon conducting "large-scale research" on this issue in order to dispute the debate regarding the appropriateness of the content and use of EFT textbooks in Bangladesh (p. 329).

Even though the initiatives taken to improve English language education have brought changes in educational policy and curriculum practices worldwide, significant changes are yet to be brought in case of assessing the policies concerning English language testing. As Das,

et.al. (2014) states, "A number of studies have been reported in the literature regarding language assessment reform. These studies suggest that the ELE reform does not necessarily lead to positive changes in English language assessment or such changes may not be compatible with the intended outcome of the ELE reform" (p.329). However, some modifications are brought in testing practices (for instance, testing speaking skills) in some countries despite the lacking of skilled teachers who would design the tests understanding the learner's context (Davison, 2007). According to Cumming (2009), concerns lie in case of English language assessment as majority of the studies highlighted the conservativeness of this testing and as McNamara & Roever (2006) stated, the barriers faced in conducting communicative language testing is the fact that there are lacking of well-trained, skilled language teachers.

Also, majority of the time the policy concerning language testing is designed and modified without consulting with the teachers who are the major stakeholders knowing the condition and context of language teaching and learning (Das et.al. 2014, p. 329). Therefore, the rate of facing success in implementing a new way of language assessment does not provide a positive sign. For example, Farhady and Hedayati (2009) reported on the English language assessment in Iran where despite several trials on reforming the English language assessment, no major change was not seen in the assessment practice because the teachers instead of using formative and diagnostic assessment kept on testing student's grammar, spelling and vocabulary. In this context, Bangladesh has not yet been able to bring out positive changes despite introducing various reform policies in education like other nations. According to Quader (2001), the studies conducted on this agenda suggested inclinations of Stakeholders towards adopting a new approach of language assessment. "An extensive documentary analysis of test formats and question papers of all secondary education boards in the country shows that in spite of efforts to revise the question papers, there is a significant gap between what is

intended to be taught and what is measured" (Das, et. al., 2014, p. 330). Also, despite the reformed curriculum focused on the development of all the four skills, the syllabus acknowledges the testing of speaking and listening skills only. Therefore, Haidar (2008) pointed out that not only are there less ways of assessing speaking and listening skills, but also the test items designed for writing and reading skills lack reliability and validity. Additionally, Khan (2010) while evaluating the test design, marks distribution as well as test items of Secondary School certificate (S.S.C) and Higher Secondary Certificate (H.S.C) examinations, pointed out the lack of testing oral skills in the English examination which does not match the objectives of curriculum proposed by NCTB (as cited in Al Amin & Greenwood, 2018).

Such problematic design of English language tests makes the students memorize answers that are suggested by the teachers which they firmly believe will appear in the examination (Das et al., 2014). Such practices adopted by the teachers and the students goes against the principles of CLT method that focuses on developing language skills rather than making learners memorize few grammatical components or writing pieces related to the language which does not really help increasing their communicative competence. Such practices also highlight society's perceptions which values more on grades rather than the development of learners' skills and knowledge which he/she needs to apply effectively in real life situations. Hence, this noteworthy gap between teachers' and students' intentions of teaching and learning along with the objective of testing has to be acknowledged in order to assure the validity and reliability of these tests (Das et al., 2018). Otherwise, despite obtaining highest grades and CGPAs in these tests, the students will fall behind if they are not assessed in terms of their developed knowledge and skills.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter briefly outlines and documents the methodology adopted and sought to conduct this research. It first outlines the research design along with a discussion explaining the research methodology adopted to conduct the study. Additionally, it also talked about the ways of collecting data how they were interpreted and analysed to address the research questions. Also, the researcher sought to stick to the research ethics; hence, all the ethical considerations and limitations of this research has been mentioned in the end.

3.1. Research Design

The qualitative approach was adopted to address the research questions in this study, since it aims to give the researchers an in-depth understanding over a specific topic depending upon the information found through observing a group of participants. Since this research intended to "describe, collect and tell stories" (Creswell, 2012, p.22) and pen down participants' experiences, a narrative research design under the category of qualitative study seemed suitable. A series of steps for collecting and analysing the data were followed. In order to establish and connect the findings that appeared as themes from the data extracted from the interview, deductive process of qualitative research was adopted. All the emerging themes were discussed in order to address the research questions leading this research.

This research is outlined to investigate students' viewpoint regarding the high-stakes English language testing at the higher secondary level of Bangladesh. Currently, there exist many studies whose findings stressed upon how the current English language testing system needs immediate reformation in order to provide quality education to the learners. Yet, they lacked students' voice which needs to be addressed since they are the one whose future depends on the outcome of these high-stakes tests. Therefore, the researcher attempted to

provide students' view regarding high-stakes English language testing while discussing to what extent these tests are helping to develop their knowledge and skills that are supposed to help them in their practical life.

3.2. Research Questions

Thus, the research questions addressed in this study are:

- What are students' learning expectations while participating in these high-stakes English language tests?

- Do students in Bangladesh develop their language skills while preparing themselves for these language tests?

3.3 Participants of the Study and Data Collection Procedure

To conduct the research, the second-year college going students of Bangladesh were chosen as the participants. Since these students already participated in 3 public examinations previously, they were expected to held a better outlook and much informative experience to share regarding these tests, which decided their fate in 12 years of their schooling. Initially, the participants were casually asked if they are interested in participating in this study. With the help of 3 interested participants, the open-ended interview questions were piloted first and based on their responses, some of them got rephrased and improvised. Later on, audio-recorded interviews of those participants were taken and they were requested to let their friends and acquaintances studying in college know if they would be interested to participate in this study.

The questions being open ended, the initial plan was to conduct an audio-recording interview with the participants as "it is more neutral and less intrusive way" (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003, p.166) of controlling an interview. However, finding a convenient time for conducting

the interview became an issue. Not to mention, due to Covid-19 pandemic all the educational institutions were closed according to the advice of the World Health Organization (WHO) that asked everyone to stay at home while avoiding social gatherings (World Health Organization, 2020). Hence, it created barriers for me to conduct physical interviews. Hence, Google Forms were utilized to make the interview questions available to them. The participants enthusiastically circulated the links to their friends and peers while considering the researcher's request and facilitated the data collection process. Following these procedures, 25 responses were extracted from the participants. All the recordings and information were documented in Word files later on which is attached in the appendix section of the research paper. The following table contains information about the participants where their original names have been replaced with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality:

No.	Name of the Participants	Name of the Institution
1	Sanjana	XYZ Cross College
2	Rakibul	S.J. College
3	Tasmia	Z City College
4	Nabila	Viqi Noon College
5	Hossain	F Zilla School
6	Rahman	Z City College
7	Haque	DRMC College
8	Salam	SRJ Government College
9	Islam	Z City College

10	Arnob	GSc Science College
11	Sarah	SAGC Girls' College
12	Sadika	SAGC Girls' College
13	Fariha	Z City College
14	Akter	Viqi Noon College
15	Amin	SAGC Girls' College
16	Samiha	SAGC Girls' College
17	Tasneem	SAGC Girls' College
18	Maria	MUBC Public College
19	Asif	RUJ Model College
20	Chowdhury	SAGC Girls College
21	Tashfia	SAGC Girls' College
22	Mahdin	NDC College
23	Nadia	Gov. Hazi Mohammad Mohsin College.
24	Youshra	MPS School and College
25	Hasan	ACC Cantonment College

3.4. Data Analysis

Once all the collected data were filtered, some themes were sorted out for analysing and interpreting them as assigning themes in qualitative data analysis is the main outcome of

16

"data analysis that yields practical results in the field of study" (Vaismoradi et. al., 2016). Additionally, five steps proposed by Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003) in their article "Analysing Qualitative data " was followed that stressed upon categorising the date to figure out themes for a coherent organization of them. According to them, this is the most significant as well as challenging part of qualitative data analysis (p.2). Hence, following this step, pattern was identified in order to form a connection within and between categories which further helped to organize the information thematically. Thus, the conclusions extracted from these themes helped in addressing the research questions. Therefore, through revising and redrafting the collected data, a practical and relatable interpretation was constructed in this study.

3.5. Ethical Consideration

The ethical factors were strictly abided in this research since the data included participants' experience, viewpoints and perspective. Therefore, ensuring the anonymity of each of the participants was an important factor which was secured by replacing their real names with pseudonyms. Moreover, before collecting the data, it was made sure that all the participants were participating in this study voluntarily. Each of the participants were fully aware of the aim of this study and how their given information is going to be used in this research. It was ensured that the data collected are stored securely in order to avoid misuse. Also, the open-ended questions were available in both Bangla and English language thinking about the participants' comfort and they were given the right to choose any suitable time to submit their data through Google form given to them. Lastly, this research has least chances of providing any biased information since the participants were not personally known.

Chapter 4

High-stakes English Language Testing: Students' Perspective

This chapter outlines a detailed discussion of the themes that appeared from the information received from each interview session. The themes focus on students' experience and perspective on high stakes English language testing in Bangladesh, its effectiveness in enriching their language competence and how such examination system is leading to the development of various perspective in wider society further creating pressure for the students attending these exams.

4.1 English Language Testing in Bangladesh and its Influence on Developing Students' Language Proficiency

To begin with, the first theme coming out from students' interview emphasized their opinion regarding the contribution of English language testing that has been in practice for so many years in Bangladesh. Additionally, it was aimed to extract students' viewpoint on the contribution of these tests in developing their English language proficiency. Half of the participants asserted that the way English language tests are conducted in this country are not sufficient enough to bring significant changes in improving their linguistic competence. They asserted that the annual, terminal as well as board examinations that they have attended from Junior Secondary level to Secondary level of education were all writing based. As a result, the development of listening and speaking skills remained fully ignored since the questions were designed focusing on reading and writing skills only. To illustrate more, such a method of examination has confined their learning to memorization only which hardly provides any scope for them to develop their language skills in English. One of the participants, Sanjana asserted, "Since I belong to a Bangla medium background, I have always been told to memorize the grammatical rules from the time I was in school. Even now being a college going student, I am

experiencing the same method of teaching and learning." She also added that earlier in school she used to feel that she had a good knowledge of English since she was always earning good grades in this subject.

> That is what my teachers and parents had always encouraged me to do. They always emphasized upon earning higher marks in all the subjects and as a result I always felt that this is the correct way of learning English…however, I started realizing the issues with this way of conducting tests along with the ways of English language learning and teaching.

Rahman opined that in an age of internet and globalization today, they are coming in contact with western world and since they belong to a generation using social media platforms on a daily basis, English is the only language through which they can build a connection with the western culture and practices. "Initially, it was really difficult for me to comprehend what the foreign actors, singers or players are actually trying to say, whether I was watching their shows, movies or listening to their songs, interviews let alone speaking in English." He further shared his opinion by asserting that for Bangla medium schools and colleges mainly, English is taught as a subject rather than a language as a result, being students, they are always trying to get the higher or just the passing marks rather than considering how much language skills they are developing.

In the same context, Saiful stated that in a classroom not every student has the same ability to do well in a particular subject. In case of English too, there are strong and weak areas of students in terms of reading, writing or speaking and listening which need to be addressed accordingly. He asserted that

> I personally love studying English, therefore every day in school and now in college, I look forward to attending the classes. However, in my school some of my classmates

were really afraid of hearing the word 'English'. I feel that it used to happen because of the way English is taught in our classroom.

To illustrate more, Hasan further added, "In my school the teachers used to teach us English through translation. For instance, the Bengali sentence "আমি স্কুলে যাই" was taught by saying that this sentence means "I go to school" in English,　which did not prove to be helpful because despite knowing the meaning of each word we were unable to speak in that language. Rather it just pushed the students to memorize which Bengali word becomes what when we translate it into English." Similar response was shared by another student too.

Whereas the majority of the students agreed that this procedure should be changed, few students argued that the current system can be useful for those who are working hard to increase their knowledge. However, when the researcher asked them further in order to figure out the reason behind holding such an opinion, Samiha opined that:

> If memorizing some of the paragraphs and writing them in the examination hall is helping us earn a good grade, such examination procedure does not need to go through any transformation. I am saying so because in our country more attention is given to how much score or GPA you have earned in any subject or examination rather than the development of language skills.

Amin further asserted, while applying for their college admission or at the university level, they are told to work hard for getting higher grades because the higher one's grades are, the better educational institutions will accept his/her application. Therefore, some students do not feel that there lies anything wrong with the current assessment system since the education policy does not stress upon evaluating students' knowledge development based on skills. However, besides such exceptions, the majority of them opined that the current English language testing system of Bangladesh is problematic in the sense that not equal importance is

being provided to the development of all the language skills. Moreover, they have also opined that such examination and teaching systems are not making them competitive enough to communicate in English language in real life situations.

4.2. Discordancy Between Curriculum and Question Format

The analysis of the curriculum and participants' comments on question pattern highlights the presence of incongruence between the claims of the curriculum and the format of HSC English examination which eventually signals negative washback. The students of Bangladesh at higher secondary level are obliged to take part in two English tests (paper 1 & 2) in order to qualify for further study. A close analysis of the information provided in the website of NCTB (National Curriculum and Textbook Board) regarding the syllabus and test format of English language have explored that, the curriculum designed by NCTB in 2012 had two objectives, i) making the learners develop communicative competence in all the four skills of English language (e.g., reading, writing, listening and speaking) and ii) making them able to make effective communication in English language in real life situations.

However, the way HSC English tests are taken in this country neither addresses the curriculum's goals, nor does it hold a constructive validity. The analysis of the question formats and the items included in both the high-stakes English tests (paper 1 & 2) signals that they incorporate linguistic competence accompanied with its sub-competencies (e.g., textual, grammatical competence and textual organization) only. Whereas both linguistic as well as pragmatic competence are the key components and must be included in order to facilitate the communicative competence of a language learner.

The table given below manifests how English tests taken in Bangladesh put emphasis only on grammatical competence and the development of reading and writing skills. Out of the 30 items (shown in Table 2), 12 of them are included to assess the grammatical competence of

the learners (such as knowledge of vocabulary, grammatical rules and structures) whereas other 18 items are included to assess comprehension and writing skills. To answer the close tests with/without clues, students are obliged to be aware of words and phrases with other grammatical components like articles, parts of speech etc. Additionally, they are also required to have knowledge of various clauses, connectors/linking words, as well as prepositions.

Table 2: *English test item types (NCTB, 2012)*

English 1st Paper (100 marks)		English 2nd Paper (100 marks)	
Part-A: reading test	60 marks	Part-A: Grammar test	60 marks
1. MCQ	1×5=5	1. Close test with clues (vocabulary test)	0.5×10=5
2. Short Questions	2×5=10	2. Close test without clues (vocabulary test)	0.5×10=5
3. Flow Chart	2×5=10	3. Complete sentence with suitable phrases/words (with clues)	0.5×10=5
4. Summarizing	10	4. Complete sentence with suitable phrases/words (without clues)	0.5×10=5
5. Gap filling with clues (vocabulary test)	.5×10=5	5. Fill in the blanks with right form of verbs	0.5×10=5

6. Gap filling without clues (vocabulary test)	1×10=10	6. Transformation of sentences	1×5=5
7. Rearranging	1×10=10	7.Change of speech/narration	5
Part-B: Writing test	40 marks	8. Pronouns	1×5=5
8. Paragraph Writing	10	9. Modifiers	0.5×10=5
9. Completing Story	7	10. Use of linking words	0.5×10=5
10. Informal letter/e-mail writing	5	11. Synonyms & Antonyms	0.5×10=5
11. Describing graphs/charts/dialogue writing	10	12. Punctuation	0.5×10=5
12. Critical Appreciation of poem	8	Part-B: composition	40 marks
		Formal letter writing	8
		Report writing	8
		Paragraph writing	10
		Composition writing	14

Other items, for instance, story writing, formal/informal letter writing can be considered

acceptable for facilitating other competencies like speaking, listening however, they are not

utilized properly since students are more prone to memorizing these writing items instead of practicing them in real life context. Activities like dialogue or report writing loses their authenticity since the test takers are required to write these items on a given topic. However, in both the cases communication is needed. For instance, dialogues are not meant to be written, rather they are meant to be spoken so that learners can understand how in different social contexts our choice of words, tone etc. changes. Similarly, in case of writing a report on a certain topic writers need to communicate with people in order to gather information. However, the way students are given a certain topic to write on is not providing them any opportunity to use the English language in real life. The comprehensive items like answering questions after reading texts written in simplified sentences assess learners' comprehensive skills (understanding the main idea and intention of the text). These activities also help to enrich paraphrasing skills as well. However, along with comprehension and rich vocabulary, learners are required to apply this knowledge while communicating with others in the English language which the current assessment is failing to provide.

4.3. Possible Factors Creating Barriers in Establishing CLT based English Language Testing System

Compared to the number of students studying at each educational level, the number of well-trained teachers available in Bangladesh is insufficient. As a result, it is a challenging task for teachers to design or adopt a teaching method where proper and equal attention are given to all the students. Moreover, in most cases, the time duration set for each subject fails to coordinate with the total number of students in a class. Hence, most often the classroom activities remain unfinished or unevaluated which severely affects students' classroom performance as well as skills development. Almost every student shared that, in each section they had almost 80-90 students and they been moderated by one teacher single handedly. Even though many of them try to pay equal attention to each students' development, it does not seem

possible to happen every time in every single class. Regarding this, one of the participants said, when she was in school there were teachers who had encouraged us to speak in English in the classroom and even engaged them in activities like dialogue exchange, impromptu presentations on topics like about myself, my hobby etc. However, there were about 60/70 students in their section and the class duration fell very short compared to the total time it was going to take for all the students to participate equally. Also, in this way our actual syllabus would not have been completed and teachers had to be accountable to the authorities for that too.

In the same context, Fariha asserted, "Even though some of our teachers often talk about all the four language skills, the question pattern as well as the syllabus does not include any space for speaking and listening activities or tests". Sadika added that even though some teachers try to encourage and engage us in listening and speaking activities in the classroom, they cannot do so every day and it happens because they are also accountable to the authorities regarding how much of the total syllabus they have covered.

> Our syllabus and question pattern cover items only for reading and writing skills and teachers are obliged to design their questions following the instructions given by the authority. Therefore, such obligations restrict our teachers from making their own teaching rules following which they can take classes and tests that might prove to be really helpful for us to develop our English language competence.

In the same context, Arnob stated that most of the teachers who are teaching English in schools and colleges of Bangladesh are not graduates in English Language. "They are either literature, History or Political science majors and this is visible among Bangla medium teachers. In my school, most of my English teachers were History and Political Science graduates." In order to teach the students a language, the teachers need to be graduating in that particular subject;

however, in case of Bangladeshi schools and colleges there are hardly any teachers who have graduated from ELT background. "My English teachers in schools and colleges had completed their graduation in English Literature however, in the context of Bangla medium background we hardly have any topic in our syllabus that is related to literature," Hoque asserted. Thus, lack of training and correct degree is an important factor that is working as a barrier in the path of their language learning and leaving a great influence on English language testing system.

4.4. Impact of Teacher's Instructions on Students

The analysis of students' interview finds out teachers' instructions to be a key component promoting students' language learning. Their advice is seeming to have a great influence on students' preparation for English tests than their skills development which eventually develops negative washback. Almost all the participants asserted that the topics and chapters preferred and chosen by the teachers always gets priority in the classroom. As a result, students are not really provided the opportunity to express what and how they want to learn things and very less attention is given to their interests. Additionally, some of them stated that instead of encouraging them to get engaged in speaking English, teachers are more interested in teaching them about various approaches to answering questions so that higher marks and grades can be earned in the examination. As stated by Salam:

> Some of the teachers, despite wanting to teach us differently, fail to do so because they are accountable to our head teacher and parents for our test grades. Because our question does not hold any marks for speaking English therefore, most of the teachers consider the practice of speaking English an unnecessary thing.

Moreover, they asserted that due to these expectations from parents and higher authorities, not only the teachers but also the students go through immense amounts of pressure and stress. "It is not only about the test, some of the students are even scared of attending the

English classes regularly. I have a few mates who are really scared of this subject and do not want to study at all. Their only agenda is to pass this subject somehow." On this aspect, Rownak and Asif also asserted that because many of the students in this country both in rural and urban schools are prone to fail in this subject, in most cases teachers cannot help but get them engaged in practicing previous year question papers so that the strugglers at least learn about the format of the test. Rownak said:

> As long as getting higher marks is concerned, this is a very effective and helpful strategy for us because in the board examinations as well as the tests taken in the college, teachers always give questions from the previous questions. As a result, the one who has practiced and solved the questions properly from the test papers can easily answer them.

However, both of them have also agreed that chances are very low that this process helps the students in developing their language competence because they personally do not feel that by solving sample questions and previous years board questions from test papers helps them to communicate in English language effectively. "Here our focus remains only on passing the exam and gaining the higher grades. Because this is what makes our teachers and parents happy," Tasneem said. Thus, teachers' beliefs, teaching practices as well as instructions in the classroom are likely to play a significant role in shaping the test takers' learning objectives and preparation for English tests. This particular aspect found from the analysis sheds light upon how the learning and teaching objectives of the students and teachers are getting negatively influenced by HSC English tests.

Additionally, students have also said that in the *English for Today* textbook there are activities included for engaging students in listening and speaking practices. Because these two skills are not included in the syllabus as well as in the format of the HSC examination question,

the majority of the teachers do not feel the necessity of engaging their students in these activities. "Most of us have the tendency to follow the suggestions given by the teachers in the classroom as well during the personal tuition sessions and to some extent I held the teachers responsible for encouraging such practices among the students," Arnob asserted. He further elaborated by saying that in our country most of the teachers give more importance to those who are taking private tuitions from them. Not to mention they are even less interested in teaching anything effectively in the classroom. "In my school, there were situations where students used to take private tuitions from the subject teachers with a hope that this will help them earn the pass mark in the respective subject. I had and still have many classmates who are very weak in English and all they want is to gain the pass mark in this subject." Similar to Arnob, Nabila, Salam, Rownak as well as Youshra stated that the objective of majority of their classmates is not focused on learning how to speak well in English rather they just want to gain a good grade or the passing marks. As Salam stated:

> Most of them are not even aware of the four skills mentioned in the curriculum as well as in the book. Many of them do not even read the main textbooks suggested by NCTB. They just follow books like *Nobodut, Panjeri* etc. which basically provide sample questions and exercises and sadly it is the teachers who recommend these books.

Thus, despite having textbooks that can help to develop the language skills of the learners, students in Bangladesh are not being able to utilize them properly because of the disharmony existing between the testing and curriculum policy.

4.5. Inadequate Assessment Literacy Among Teachers

Teachers are supposed to be at the leading edge as architects, initiators and patrons of language assessments. Therefore, they are expected to be capable and well aware of the effectual application of language assessment and testing. Concerning teachers' mastery

regarding the current examination system in Bangladesh, it was found from the participants that not all the teachers are well aware of the correct way of conducting or designing English language tests. Majority of them opined that even though teachers are bound to obey the rules and regulations suggested by the Ministry of Education regarding syllabus design and question formats, there is a certain standard which needs to be maintained. However, most of the teachers fail to maintain this standard, which raises questions upon the validity of these English tests. As stated by Rakibul, "most of the teachers have this tendency to copy paste the questions from sample model test questions as well as test papers, which to some extent deteriorates the standards of question papers." Similar opinion was derived from Sarah, Nabila, Salam as well as Fariha where they agreed that there were similar topics given for composition, paragraph and essay writing in 3 or more tests consecutively. Salam said:

> This is not leaving a positive impact on our learning since most of us already have this to take a short cut route to earn good grades. Due to this repetition, it creates a sense of assurance among the students that this particular topic is considered to be the most important one by the teachers. Therefore, they start memorizing it from one particular book which narrows our ability to think critically and analytically.

In the similar context, Nabila asserted that she can guarantee that more than 70% of her classmates will not be able to write properly if an instant topic is given to them. "It will become very problematic for them to write in an organized way because in the classroom we are not at all encouraged to practice free hand writing." Because teachers are failing to implement alternate assessment strategies due to which there remains a lack of diversity in the question papers, it is eventually accelerating negative washback in the learning process of the students. As a result, students are only improving in the areas of grammatical, textual competence that is being covered by the test items.

Akter and Amin said that proper instructions should be given to the students in higher secondary level on writing in an organized and precise manner. The reason they responded this way was because they encountered the same kind of topics in each of their educational levels. "As we are moving forward towards tertiary level of education, obviously at that level teachers will expect us to write in a more organized way which should be an improvised version than the way we have been writing for so many years. However, if I tell you about my progress, I feel that I have not been able to bring any sort of improvement in this regard," Akter asserted. In the same context, Amin stated:

> In the current system, there are 40% marks allocated for composition part, which comprise formal/informal letter writing, paragraph writing, essay writing, report/CV writing and critical appreciation of poems. Now that I am in intermediate level, some of the new topics like report, CV writing and critical analysis are the new items that are new additions. Otherwise, there has not been any changes in this part since class 6.

Additionally, they asserted that even though they see some variation in the paragraph topics in English 1st paper, no changes are visible in English 2nd paper. Amin said:

> I have been reading and writing the same composition on topics like "Aim in life", "My Childhood Memories", "A Village Fair", "Benefits of Reading Newspaper" since my school level and still doing the same. Even though 40% marks have been allocated for the composition part, in the classroom teachers are always discussing grammar related topics. They hardly give us any guidance regarding how a paragraph is different from an essay and how we should write these two items in a different manner, following a different structure.

This clearly hints at their lack of proper knowledge on designing tests and instructing students.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The information gathered from the participants: Higher Secondary level students regarding English language testing and online assessment has been recorded and described in previous chapters chronologically. Each chapter consisted of themes as well as sub themes which are compiled together in this chapter. Here, the researcher has added her own opinion and built a connection between the findings and the research question that directed this whole research. Additionally, this chapter discusses the constraints and possibility of further research based on the outcome of this study.

5.1. Findings

5.1.1. English Language Testing in Bangladesh: Issues, Challenges and Barriers

Categorization of this theme consists of the sub-themes mentioned below:

- English Language Testing in Bangladesh and the Development of students' English Language Proficiency
- Discordancy Between Curriculum and Question Format and its influence on students
- Possible Factors Creating Barriers in Establishing a Suitable English Language Testing System
- Impact of Teacher's Instructions on Students
- Inadequate Assessment Literacy Among Teachers

As explained elaborately in the former chapter, these sub themes have narrated the Higher Secondary level students' viewpoint and experiences regarding English language testing system practiced in Bangladesh. Here, the main focus of the researcher was to record students' perspective regarding the effectiveness of the practiced testing system in facilitating their

English language skills. Because the country's education system has made these High Stakes testing a ritual where the test results carry a great significance in shaping learners' future, it was necessary to hear what the participants of these exams had to say. 23 out of 25 participants have opined that the current testing system for English language needs to go through a significant number of modifications as it is not contributing much in improving or developing their English Language skills.

Additionally, they have also talked about how focus is only given on two of the language skills only which marks the gap existing between the objectives of the national curriculum and the question patterns due to which learners are not being linguistically competent. Majority of them stressed that there is not much exposure to the practice of listening and speaking skills and how teachers are still following the Grammar Translation Method while teaching English. Many of them opined that even though the teaching materials provided by NCTB consists of activities that require the practice of listening and speaking skills, the teachers are not being able to utilize those opportunities properly. In this context, many of the participants have held time constraints and unavailability of proper facilities as barriers in the path of their language teaching and testing process. Also, all the participants have agreed that the teachers are still lacking proper training and guidance in terms of teaching English as a second language. Some of the participants have also agreed with the researcher's opinion that instead of focusing on developing skills that will be useful in practical life, the focus of these high stakes tests is still stuck on increasing the passing rates and gaining the higher GPA. Collectively, all the participants expressed their concerns regarding the reliability and validity of the High Stakes English Language testing practiced in Bangladesh.

Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendation

This study aimed to explore students' perspective regarding high-stakes English language testing in Bangladesh. It additionally discussed a bit about the very recent transformation that happened in the educational system due to the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the students' perspective, experience and narratives, the study specifically presented the issues related to English language testing which needs to be addressed immediately to ensure quality education. Therefore, the data were collected from the higher secondary level students who will soon be entering into their tertiary level education and have prior experience of these high-stakes tests. By analyzing and interpreting the information extracted from them, this study also highlighted the challenges and barriers related to online assessment which has been the only medium for keeping the academic practices on run in this pandemic situation. The findings of this study will assist the novice pedagogues to hold a clear vision of the challenges and barriers that exist in the path of establishing a successful teaching and learning method for the English language. Based on the study's findings, the educators as well as policy makers will be able to judge the validity and reliability of the current language testing and assessment process. It will further help them to take actions and find solutions which will address the mismatch between curriculum and assessment practices so that effective language learning can take place.

Additionally, the findings also shed light upon teacher's inefficiency in pedagogical skills, lack of facilities and support from authorities, failure in utilizing digital tools in classrooms to facilitate language learning, inadequacy of enough exposure towards language skills practice as well as guidance on academic writing. Considering the number of teachers and students in rural and urban areas along with the economic condition of Bangladesh, the researcher also agrees that it is not possible to solve these issues overnight. However, by increasing teacher's literacy regarding English language teaching methods through proper

training, the situation can get better to a great extent since they are the only ones who can make

positive changes in the classroom by implementing effective teaching methods. Additionally,

considering more participants' experience and perception into account, the researcher believes

this research can successfully add a new arena for future works in this issue.

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Appendix A

Sample Interview of a student on appropriateness and validity of high-stakes English language testing and assessment in Bangladesh

- What do you think about the current English language testing that has been in practice for so many years in Bangladesh?

Ans. I do not like the way English tests are taken in this country because it is all about some grammatical rules and memorization.

- Do you think the results of these public examinations (JSC, SSC, HSC) can actually deter how much knowledge you have gained?

Ans. No. From my viewpoint, these exams only measure how much a student can memorize or write about theoretical things. Teachers only asks question from theories. A student can be weak in theory but can be good in practical knowledge. So, I don't think these exams can evaluate a student's knowledge properly.

- According to the curriculum designed by NCTB (2012), the teachers should be focused on the development of all the 4 skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking) of English language. Did your teacher ever talk about these skills in the classroom? If so, then how?

Ans. Our teachers mention about these four skills but they never make us practice these skills. We only practice writing nothing else. Furthermore, they do not even talk in English in the class. They teach us English in Bengali. For this reason, we are not fluent in English. Sometimes teachers ask to read a paragraph in the class. However, there is nothing more than that to gain proficiency in a language.

- Does your teacher encourage you to speak in English in the classroom? Does she speak to you all in English language while giving lessons?

Ans. As I mentioned our teachers do not speak in English in the classroom and they do not have any special concern regarding our skills in English. They just tell us that we should write properly in the exam script.

- Do you practice free hand writing in English? Will you be able to write a paragraph/essay on any unknown topic given to you in English?

Ans. I do not practice free hand writing. But I do memorize paragraph and write those several times so that in the exam script I do not have any grammatical errors. For me, it is really difficult to write an essay or paragraph on an unknown topic without memorizing. I do not have good control over vocabulary.

- In your examination, there are comprehensive text for answering some questions which are taken from your EFT (*English for Today*) book. If you are given an unknown comprehensive text for answering questions, will you be able to do that?

Ans. I guess yes. I can answer from unknown comprehensive text. But it will be difficult for me if there is too much unknown words.

- How do you take preparations for English tests?

Ans. I revise paragraphs and other writing items. Moreover, I also revise grammatical rules from *Advanced Learners*.

- Besides the English classes held in your respective college, do you take additional tutoring/coaching classes for taking preparation for English tests?

Ans. Yes. I go to a coaching center and I also have a private tutor who gives me suggestions of the writing items and makes me practice grammatical rules.

- How does the teachers in coaching/tutoring classes give you lessons in English that helps you prepare well for the examination?

Ans. Both my private tutor and coaching center provides suggestions. Furthermore, they take mock tests and make me practice previous years' test paper questions. Again, they

repeatedly make me practice questions that came several times in the board exams. This is how they help me prepare well for the exam.

- Does your teacher ask you to memorize all the grammatical rules to do well in the grammar part?

Ans. Yes!!! My teachers always enforce me to do so. Sometimes they ask me about the rules. They provide us grammar sheets where all the rules are written in short cut forms.

- Do you ask for suggestions from your teachers before any examinations to prepare well for English exams? Are they helpful enough?

Ans. Yes. I do ask for suggestions. These are quite helpful because most of the time I find common from those suggestions.

- Do you feel any stress or anxiety before any English examination? Why or why not?

Ans. I feel extremely stress before English exam. It is a foreign language and different also. Again, I feel pressurized what if I do not find common in the exam from the suggestions! How will I manage then?

- Do you feel insecure while speaking in English in front of your friends or the classroom? If so, why?

Ans. I feel shy and stressed. Like, if my pronunciation becomes wrong, the entire class will laugh at me. Moreover, no one speaks in English and if I do so they mock me as well.

- Do you think gaining higher grades/passing in English tests are more important now than developing your language skills in English?

Ans. I do not think so. But getting good grades is really important since at the end people only see and care about the grades.