

The Impact of High-Stake English Examination System of Bangladesh on Students' Oral English Skills: A Qualitative Study

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

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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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Ethics Statement

I, Mehenaj Jahan, testify while conducting the research, I took permission of my participants to use their real-life experiences in my thesis. All the works included in the dissertation are original work resulting from my own knowledge. I convey only relevant information and ensured that none of them was participants' personal information and maintained ethical consideration by mentioning pseudonyms. I did member checking with all of the 12 participators before finalizing my work. Therefore, there is no room for my own misinterpretation of the data that has been collected for research purpose. Moreover, I have strictly maintained participants and my own interpretation did not affect their statements.

Abstract

This study examines the high-stake English examination system of Bangladesh and its impact on students' oral English skills. Every year a lot of students in Bangladesh participate in high-stake exams such as S.S.C, H.S.C and other admission tests. The test result of these exams plays a significant role in students' subsequent life. In these examinations, almost all cases, students reading and writing skills are assessed. However, there is no provision to assess students' oral English skills. Therefore, oral skills are neglected in the classroom both by the teachers and students so that they could focus more on what is important for the examinations. A few researches in Bangladesh context explored the drawbacks of the examination system and the negative washback these exam exert. This qualitative study, based on the students' and teacher's voices, explored the impact of these exams on students' oral English development. The selective participants of this study are from higher secondary level and university level students. The researcher has collected data through interviews and class observation. The data were then analysed thematically. The conclusion drawn from the findings shed light upon the wide mismatch between the curriculum and the testing system, the non-existence of English-speaking environment, learners' misconception about oral skill learning, prevalent use of old teaching methods, lack of assessment literacy among teachers and the impact these tests exert on students' oral skill development. The study will have impact on numerous aspects including curriculum development, policy, teacher development, and further research.

Keywords: high-stake test, oral skills, curriculum, assessment literacy.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate my work to the Almighty and my ever-supporting parents.

Acknowledgement

Firstly, all my praises are to Almighty Allah for keeping me healthy and bestowing me with the chance to seek my Bachelor Degree. Secondly, I would like to mention my ever-supporting parents for always being conditionally supportive with every decision of my life. I am wholeheartedly grateful to my supervisor, Md. Al Amin, for his encouragement, supervision and guidance throughout these two semesters of my dissertation.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In high-stakes tests “stakes” are “high” because the results of the tests, as well as the ranking and categorization of schools, teachers and children that extend from the results are reported to the public (McNeil, 2000). High-stake testing has a great significance in shaping a person's educational and professional career. In Bangladesh, tests are considered as a social - ritual which is performed every year at a predetermined time. Some common high-stake tests in Bangladesh are national board exams- (S.S.C, and H.S.C.), university admission tests, medical and engineering entrance exam, B.C.S exam, IELTS and TOEFL etc. As Bangladesh is a densely populated country, there remain limited seats in educational institutions and job sectors. Consequently, students have to face a high competition while admitting them into well-known or government institutions. The favorable result of the high-stake testing can ensure- admission into preferred educational institutions, getting scholarship, professional certification and high-ranking job sectors etc. High-stake testing has both intended and unintended consequences. Such as, if any student gets a poor grade on S.S.C. board exam then he or she will fail to apply for a good college. Similarly, cutting a good figure in the H.S.C exam is also necessary to get admitted into a renowned university. In university admission tests or in job sectors, these high- stake test results are also taken into consideration. Nowadays, getting A+ has become a concern of social prestige for the test takers and also for the institutions. Besides, parents also remain anxious about their children’s results. Eventually, passing the exam with a higher grade has become the main objective for the students and teachers are also supporting it.

English is considered as the second language in our country. To become competent in the English language, learners have to become equally qualified on the four skills because the skills nurture one another. In most high-stake tests; especially in board exams and public examinations

only two skills are evaluated which are reading and writing. So, students and teachers focus only on these two skills in the classroom. Correspondingly, speaking and listening skills are also important for them. “Speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that involves producing, receiving, and processing information” (Florez,1999). It works hand to hand with listening in the communication process. Without practicing it is impossible to have a good command over the oral skills. As EFL learners don't get enough opportunity to exercise speaking and listening skills in the classroom or outside the classroom; the foundation of these skills remains weak. Consequently, they cannot show a good performance at their university level.

1.1 Research context

High-stake tests shape the education system of Bangladesh as the teaching and learning policy is dominated by it. The most common high-stake examinations of Bangladesh are S.S.C. and H.S.C. In this exam-oriented country, students have to give several types of exam. Some types of exams are taken institutionally and some are taken board wise. High-stake tests are held nationwide under the Ministry of Education. The result is also published in a selective day. The grade contains high prestige for the students on the society. Students not only have to prepare themselves mentally but also physically and psychologically. Before two-three months students become more serious and start to prepare themselves for the exams. On the examination days, parents also go with their children to give them mental support. They wait outside of the exam center until the exam get ends. Besides, the result of the students also carries the fame of an institution. After publishing of the grades; newspapers print the photographs of the high ranked students and intuitions.

During the pandemic era, the teaching and learning had followed remote learning. To maintain the safety of teachers and students all the institutions were shut down on March 2020.

In order to continue the education, the Ministry of education has introduced alternative assessment system. Classes were held in different online platforms such as zoom, meet, Google classroom etc. At that time, students were evaluated based on their assignments' marks and online class performance and attendance. Assignments were provided every week and students will get the whole week for finishing those. Usually, assignments were based on the writing practices.

Recently, the education ministry has announced that they have modified the curriculum and marks distribution. According to them, the new curriculum will focus on students' language competency rather emphasizing on their theoretical knowledge. Moreover, the test content will make depending on the new curriculum as well. They also ensured that the teachers will be trained based on the new curriculum. According to the proposed curriculum, students from 9 to 10 will get 50% marks based on their class performance and the remaining 50% marks will be given based on the performance of their annual or public exam. However, students of 11 to 12 will get 30% based on their class performance and the remaining 70% will be given based on their performance of public exam.

1.2 Purpose of the study

This study aims to highlight the high-stakes examination system of Bangladesh. I would like to focus on English subjects; how it is taught in the classrooms, does they match the curriculum goals or not, and whether students get a chance to practice all four skills in the classroom.

Moreover, the high-stakes exams do not evaluate students' oral skills. So, I will investigate how it is impacting them.

1.3 Significance of the study

Bangladesh is an examination-focused country where the results of high-stakes tests are given high attention. But, in the English exam, there are no marks allocated for speaking and listening skills. However, after the higher secondary level students are obligated to use English in oral communication. Through the study, it will be possible to look at the students' perception of their oral skill improvement. Besides, the policymakers will be able to judge the validity and reliability of this examination as it lacks connection with the curriculum. The research also addresses the failure of teachers to use digital tools and provide appropriate guidance on language learning.

2. Chapter Two: Literature review

This chapter presents a review of the literature on the testing-based education system of Bangladesh, including the high-stake examination policy and assessment system. The review also talks about English language teaching and learning in Bangladesh; impact of examination on curriculum, students and teachers. Besides, English speaking problems faced by students are reviewed here as well. Furthermore, this section explores unequal treatment towards four language skills, textbook evaluation and the modification of test format.

2.1. Testing based education system

The educational system of Bangladesh is extremely dependent on testing. According to Amin (2018), today's education system is exam oriented. In his view, it gives more emphasis on preparing students for examinations rather than following the goal of the national curriculum. He believes if the curriculum is followed properly then students' will be "competent in spoken as well as written English and to be effective communicators in real life situations"(P.16). But, the examinations are creating unnecessary pressure for the students and affecting their actual learning process. It is believed by many people that examinations inspire students to learn something earnestly. The examination system highly influences the learning trends and styles of the students because the knowledge or skills of the examinees are evaluated on the basis of the performance presented in the answer scripts. (Rahman et al, 2016).

2.2. High-stake English examination policy of Bangladesh

In the examinations, "oral presentation, leadership skill, co-curricular activities are not included at all"(Tahreen 2014). Tahreen added that "discrete-point tests in multiple-choice

format" are still the most used approach, especially in high stakes examinations"(p. 150). Thus "real learning gets impeded" as learning a language is given less importance (p. 148). Hoque (2011) states, public examinations influence the attitudes, behaviors, and motivation of teachers, learners and parents, and because examinations often come at the end of a course, this influence is seen working in a backward direction, hence the term washback (p.1).

Apart from this, the quality of high-stake English examinations is always being criticized. According to Sultana (2018), the H.S.C examination lacks construct validity because she finds a gap between the intended to be taught and what is measured. It happens because the curriculum claims it has given equal importance towards all the four language skills. But in the public exam, listening and speaking skills are never tested. The author added, the exam also lacks content validity as some items require the memorization skill rather than the communication skill. Besides, its reliability is also under question as there remains ups and downs in the result. The author further stated that the question paper does not include authentic texts. So, it also lacks authenticity. However, the existing English testing system of Bangladesh welcomes rote learning which is a wrong way of learning a language as it doesn't develop the cognitive ability of students (Rahman, et al. 2016).

2.3. Assessment system

Different types of assessment systems influence different types of learning. There are two types of assessment - formative and summative assessment. The purpose of formative assessment is to give continuous feedback to students to promote or improve further learning. However, summative assessment refers to giving feedback at the end of a class or course such as final exams or high-stake tests etc. (Salauddin & Begum 2020, p.90). Teachers use assessments in their classrooms to serve at least three different categories of purpose: a means of intoning

decisions, as teaching tool, and classroom management, behavioral control to keep students in line (Stiggins, 1991, p.6). According to Begum & Farooqui (2008), the assessment system of Bangladesh is based on the memorization and comprehension skills of the students. However, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation are not included in the assessment system (p.45).

Bangladesh introduced School Based Assessment in 2005. The assessment methods integrated into the SBA policy included class tests, class work, homework, assignments, oral presentations, and group work (p.46). Salahuddin & Begum (2020), stated that there are 20% marks for continuous assessment. That is why 20 marks out of 100 marks are assessed during classroom activities. The marks are also distributed in different segment like 10 marks for classroom works, 05 marks for homework or investigation works and another 05 marks for class tests. Besides, the speaking and listening skills of students are assessed through continuous assessment and these 20 (10+ 10) marks are added to determine learners' final grade in the SA (p. 91)

2.4. English language teaching and learning in Bangladesh

English language learning has become an inevitable part for Bangladeshi students. To make it easier for students, the educational premises has introduced a communicative language learning policy which includes all the four language skills. By following this policy, it is possible to gain a good command in English. Islam, W., Ahmad, S., & Islam, M. D. (2022) states that EFL learners treat English only as a compulsory academic subject which theory tries to pass through memorization. They are unaware of using English as a means of communication.

Before the advent of the CLT method, GTM with ALM were followed in the teaching methodology. The CLT method was introduced in 1990 which includes four language skills. But,

still the CLT method is not followed properly by the teachers. Tahereen (2014) claims that Students get used to GTM, so even if they are given instruction in CLT; they will face difficulty to follow it. Besides, the language testing format also doesn't follow the CLT method.

According to Krashen's input hypothesis, a learner can acquire a language if he or she receives comprehensible input of that language. In his view, language learning is propelled by the receptive skills rather than by the productive ones. He also talks about (I+1) level where-I is the learner's current level and +1 denotes the next level of his language competence. In classrooms teachers work as the main exposure of second language input but they fail to give enough comprehensible inputs to the students in English language. In the contrary, Swain (1985) believes on language output. He claimed, "language acquisition might occur through producing language, either spoken or written" (p.148). In 1993, Swain identify four ways of learning language through output: a) to improve fluency and automaticity, b) to try new expressions, c) to notice what they know and do not know and lastly d) to generate feedback. According to Harmer (1998), "getting students to speak- to use the language they are learning- is a vital part of the teacher's job. Students are the people who need the practice, in other words, not the teacher. Therefore, a good teacher maximizes STT and minimizes TTT".

2.5. Impact of examination on curriculum

The purpose of setting a curriculum is to inform students on how and what they will learn throughout the course. High-stakes tests attest that tests are responsible for narrowing the school curriculum by directing teachers to focus only on those subjects and skills that are included in the examinations. As a consequence, such tests are said to dominate and distort the whole curriculum (Green, 2007). Tests should have a reflection of the curriculum. According to Hoque (2011), one of the negative washback of public examinations is the narrowing of the curriculum by teachers

to mainly focus on the test related items (p.3). Teachers do not prepare any lesson plan following the curriculum. They think it is difficult to finish the syllabus if they follow the curriculum-based learning activities (Jahan, Ahmed & Uddin, 2017). 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).

2.6. Impact of examination on students and teachers

There is a close relationship of examination with teaching and learning. Jahan, Ahmed & Uddin (2017) in their article talked about the effect of high-stake tests on classroom instructions. Their findings assert that teachers and administrators give more focus in "content coverage and test preparation activities rather than promoting deeper improvements in instructional practice"(p.47). According to the authors, high stake tests are responsible for behavioral change in students as it promotes excessive pressure and carries important consequences. They also find that only test worthy topics are taught in the class and unimportant topics are omitted from the syllabus. Moreover, they are inspired in repeated learning and cramming (p.50). The teaching method is lecture based and there is absence of language learning activities. They stated, high-stake tests influence the classroom instruction because the grades serve as a milestone in learners' future life (p.51). So, teachers are interested by test driven practices rather than teaching centered accountability.

Tahreen (2014), in her study finds that 55% English teachers spend more than 50% of their total class time in test preparation. Besides, 18% teachers spend 50% and 27% teachers spend less than 50% class time in test preparation (p.168). The author further stated that English language teaching in our country give emphasize on grammatical rules, translations, and vocabulary memorization.

Hoque (2016) observed an EFL classroom at a higher secondary level to see how teacher and students interact with each other during the class time. He believes that interaction between teacher and students play the key role in language learning. According to him,

"Effective teacher-student interactions create: Emotional Support which means the positive relationships among teachers and peers; Classroom Organization which suggests well-managed classrooms that provide students with frequent, engaging learning activities; and Instructional Support which focuses the Interactions that teach students to think, provide ongoing feedback and support, and facilitate language" (p.22).

He noticed that students were not actively participating in the group discussions. Besides, some of them were uninterested in answering the teacher's questions. However, only a few students were asking questions to the teacher and the others were sitting lazy. While interviewing, the teacher expressed - he wants the learners to become more active, responsive and ask questions. The author asserted that Bangladeshi students are very inactive in class participation. To solve this problem, the teachers should use authentic teaching materials to grab their attention. The teacher should make the lesson enthusiastic by using various types of learning activities. "Some creative/artistic activities, book work, skits, real-world scenarios, music, discussions, etc. that will both challenge some students and make others feel a higher level of success"(p.4).

Amin (2021), in her research observed that "the majority of secondary English teachers do not have an appropriate amount of proficiency in English and carry limited skills and understanding to maintain classroom communication in English. Consequently, it becomes more

difficult to introduce alternative testing and assessment processes that can help the learners develop their English language skill” (p.29). Thus, language learning is impeded by the testing system.

2.7. English speaking problems faced by students

According to Islam, W., Ahmad, S., &Islam, M. D. (2022), language learners face problems in two areas when they try to speak in English. They are- knowledge factors and skills factors. "The knowledge factors refer to the speaker's linguistic knowledge that is used for oral production. The skill factors mean that the learners' knowledge is not sufficiently automatic to ensure fluency (p.50).

The authors have taken interviews from both public and private university students and find that public university students face more difficulties in speaking English. The result shows that because of the economic crisis, public universities can't give special care to developing students' speaking skills. Besides, students of public universities are more worried about their CGPA rather than language competency. However, private universities implement E-learning using digital technology. The authors state that students' limited knowledge on vocabulary, fluency, grammar, pronunciation and comprehension give rise to low confidence, anxiety and shyness etc.

However, Kabir (2014) finds that many students feel shy or anxious to speak English in the classroom because the others laugh at them when they make mistakes. According to her, removal of anxieties is essential to become comfortable with a new language and a new learning environment.

2.8. Unequal treatment towards four language skills

To have a good command over the English language it is necessary to learn all the four language skills - reading, writing, speaking and listening. But, in Bangladeshi classrooms only reading and writing skills are given high importance. Kabir (2014) in her study found that 30% of students asserted that they never practice spoken English in the classroom and 25% said they use English language a little bit in the classroom. Besides, 56.60% students revealed that their teachers use Bangla language in the classroom and 33.33% students told that their teachers use English sometimes while explaining class work. Another research asserted that 80% emphasis is given on reading in which 30% for grammar and 50% for vocabulary. 20% emphasis is given to writing in which 15% for general writing and 5% for creative writing. But no emphasis is given to speaking and listening skills. (Hani & Siddika, 2018).

As a consequence, after 13 to 15 years of their education life students face speaking test on their higher level for the first time. According to Akter (2020), Speaking assessments can take many forms, for oral sections of standardized tests such as the Basic English Skills Test (BEST) or the English as a Second Language Oral Assessment (ESOLA) for authentic assessments such as progress checklists, analysis of taped speech samples, or anecdotal records of speech in classroom interactions (p.86). Some researchers have interviewed language teachers to know about their language teaching process in the classroom. The results show that oral skills evaluation is not included in their lesson plan.

2.9. EFT Textbook Evaluation

The textbook that is designed by NCTB has a significant impact on English language learning. The author of this article has done his research by evaluating the ELT materials that are provided

in the textbook for the learners. In his view, learners will fail to achieve the language learning goals if the practice materials of the textbook are blindly chosen or randomly designed. His target was to find out if the curriculum is successful to meet the goals that were claimed by the policy makers of the textbook. Ali (2014) states that, materials evaluation appears as an unavoidable phenomenon in a language teaching programme. We need to evaluate the materials to see whether they are appropriate to the needs of the learners, and whether they can be used effectively in teaching specific language skills"(p.2). In the evaluation process, the author has applied both the internal (micro level) and external process (macro level). The goal of external evaluation is to examine "the claims made on the cover of the teachers'/students' book and the introduction and table of contents". However, the goal of internal evaluation is to look at "the presentation of the language skills in the textbook, the grading and sequencing of contents in the textbook, authenticity of tape for listening skill, authenticity of materials for speaking skill practice".

His research findings show that there is a mismatch between the goals that are written in the curriculum and the way they have designed the book. According to him, all the four language skills are not given equal importance in the textbook; speaking and listening skills are less valued. Moreover, the materials provided for students' exercises are not authentic, artificial pictures are used and the lesson topics are uninteresting. He also finds that in most of the lessons there are reading activities which are further integrated with writing and speaking tests. Besides, writing tasks are not "process-based; they are rather based on traditional product approaches". In case of speaking tasks there are some group or pair activities related to the chapters. However, listening skill is given less or no importance. Ali surprisingly said that the textbook doesn't have any tape recorder for the practice of listening skill. To improve listening, teachers will read the

passages out loud and students will listen to them. The author suggested that the NCTB should revise and redesign the textbook by providing authentic materials for speaking and listening activities.

2.10. Modification of test format

According to Amin (2018), the format and the content of the examination system of high - stake tests should be changed. He claims that the present question pattern lacks content validity. If a language test needs to have content validity, it must have the constitutions and representations of a sample of the language skill to measure that with which it is meant to be concerned. Moreover, he suggested that the pattern of the exams can follow the IELTS system where students have to prove their language proficiency in all the four areas (reading, writing, speaking and listening).

According to Hani \$ Siddika (2018), Tests should be designed in a way that the students are compelled to study all contents of the text to meet up the requirements of the examination since Bangladeshi students are in the tendency to avoid those items in the text which are not necessary for board examination (p.6). Unlike other countries, Bangladesh has also made a vision of Vision 21 in order to improve the quality of education and integrating ICT into its education system (Khan, et al, 2012).

ICT based language teaching in the classroom can provide students an authentic environment through which they can improve their oral language skills- speaking and listening. Considering the advantage of ICT, some teachers also agreed to integrate it into their teaching materials as they believe that it can make the lessons interesting and interactive, autonomous and flexible

(Khan & Kuddus 2020). So, if the oral skills are practiced properly in the class through multimedia then it would be easier for students to take part in speaking and listening exams.

It is inevitable to include the four skills in the evaluation process or else the learning of English will never be complete and the objectives of teaching and learning English will always remain unreachable. Equal emphasis on the four skills should be given in the classrooms and the examination papers because most successful learners utilize both visual and auditory input.

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). Though many reform policies have been introduced to bring a change in the education system, there is still a gap in the language assessment system.

3. Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter briefly describes the methodology of this research. It presents how the researcher has conducted her research and the approaches that are followed by her. Firstly, I outlined the research approach and procedures. Then I have talked about the main instruments of data collection. Thirdly, participants' information are given, followed by the sampling criteria and sampling procedures. Moreover, the data collection procedure is also explained here. I also discuss how I analyze and interpret the data. Finally, I mentioned all the ethical considerations and limitations of this research.

3.1. Research Approach

This research has used a qualitative approach. Before starting the research, I reviewed the literature and then I have found a research gap. Following that I have made research questions and interview questions.

3.2. Research Question

1. What is the type of high-stake testing in Bangladesh?
2. How do students prepare themselves for high-stake tests?
3. How does the high-stake testing system affect students' oral skills development?

3.3. Research Participants

Total twelve participants were chosen for this research. Among them ten were students and the other two were college teachers. The target students of this research were university students who have the experience of giving the H.S.C public exam and the students who were on their

higher secondary level. Besides, all of them were from Bangla medium background. However, both the teachers were from the same college.

The participants profile is given below where the original names of the participants have been replaced to keep confidentiality.

Name of participants	Profession	Educational level	Name of institution
A	Student	H.S.C	DMRC College
B	Student	H.S.C	DMRC College
C	Student	H.S.C	DMRC College
D	Student	H.S.C	DMRC College
E	Student	H.S.C	DMRC College
F	Student	B. A	BRAC University
G	Student	B. A	BRAC University
H	Student	B. A	Eden college
I	Student	B. A	BRAC University
a	Teacher	M. A	DMRC college
b	Teacher	M. A	DMRC college

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure is included with interviews and class observation. Before taking the actual interviews, I did a pilot study on two students.

Interview: I interviewed 12 participants for this research. The interviews were taken in face-to-face manner and interview slots were set according to their convenient time. The interview type was semi-structured. Besides, the interview questions for the teachers and students were not similar. The researcher asked both close-ended and open-ended questions. It means the researcher predetermined some questions for asking the participants and also asked some extra questions when needed. The interview questions followed simple language structure for easier understanding and the participants were encouraged to provide extra explanations whenever necessary. Moreover, I encouraged the participants to give detailed answers to the questions. Though, I didn't face any difficulties while interviewing the participants but time management was a big challenge as they remain busy with their own tasks.

Class observation: The researcher also uses class observation as a data collection tool. During the class observation, the researcher mainly put emphasis on the classroom environment, how the classes of higher secondary level are conducted by the teachers, what materials are used by the teachers, what teaching method or strategies are applied by them while taking the class, what medium of language is used by teacher and students, how much time is spend for practicing the language skills and how students participate in the class activities.

3.5. Data Analysis

The researcher audio-recorded the interview and kept notes while collecting the data. The interviews of the students were taken in Bangla language. So, I then translate them into English. Afterwards, I thoroughly go over the recorded conversations and transcribe the important lines in

a word document. It was important as the participants provided detailed information. Once I'm done with the transcription process, I selected some codes for using in my finding section. Additionally, I sorted out some themes for analyzing and interpreting the data. The conclusions drawn from the themes helped to make connections with the research questions.

3.6. Ethical Considerations

The researcher strictly has followed the ethical factors as the participants had shared their own viewpoints and lived experiences through their interviews. So, before taking the interview, the researcher explained to the participants about the purpose of her research and how she is going to use the data. The participants were guaranteed that the data collection will not be misused. Moreover, they were made sure about the anonymity of their real names. The researcher also keeps the name of the institution anonymous. So, their real names are replaced with pseudonyms. Then when they agreed to participate, the researcher provided them a consent form to fill up. Lastly, this research avoided giving any biased information about the participants.

4. Chapter Four: Findings

The following section presents the research findings of the qualitative study. The purpose was to collect the viewpoints of students and teachers regarding high-stake testing and its impacts. This section is divided into various sub-sections for easier understanding of each of the themes. The themes are generated from the data that are gathered through semi-structural interviews and class observation. The sub-sections briefly discuss about the non-existence of English-speaking environment, how teacher and students misinterpret oral skills, necessity of implanting formative assessment. Moreover, it also shed light into how large classroom and time management is a big issue in language learning setting. The findings also illustrated the mismatch between the curriculum and testing pattern; and how does it put impact on students' and teachers' motivation on acquiring a language. Moreover, it showcases that excessive time is spend on test preparation for which students become uninterested in language learning and focus on achieving high score. Besides, the learning materials and strategy that are used during my classroom observation are also describe here.

4.1. Non-existence of English-speaking environment:

Learning English as a second language is a matter of practice. But the respondents revealed that they don't get the opportunity to practice speaking English in their classroom. Participant B said, "in the classroom we practice test-papers which are reading and writing oriented. Besides, our teacher doesn't use English while delivering their lectures; he usually talks in Bangla language". Another college student stated that our surrounding plays an important role in learning English. Such as, in our class when the teacher and my classmates talk in English, I also feel interested to speak in English in the classroom. Moreover, we also practice it outside the

class”. Participant E was asked about how to create a friendly environment for the students. She replies- “To get an English-speaking environment student can join language clubs”.

Besides, when teacher A was asked does, he speaks in English in the classroom? He replies that “if I use English language then many of the students will not understand my lecture properly and fail in the exam. So, I have to translate the English passages into Bangla for clear understanding”. Another teacher told that there are many teachers who came from rural school background and they themselves aren't confident about their English-speaking accuracy. He also added that "In this digital era there are several platforms from where students can learn vocabulary and pronunciation. It will help students in making longer sentences without hesitation”. But learning only thousands of vocabularies cannot help in making conversations as it is a matter of practice. According to Krashen's (1985) input hypothesis, learners can progress in a language if they get comprehensible input as language learning is propelled by receptive skills rather than productive ones”. Harmer (1998) believes that engaging students in classroom interaction is an important part of teacher's job.

4.2. Misconception about oral skills for teaching English language:

English language teachers and learners do not understand the fact that all four language skills should be treated equally. Many people think that like the Bangla language; English language can also be learned easily by listening it. They are unknown to the fact that learning styles for both of the languages are not same. To be competent in English language one must practice it more and more; it does not happen naturally as like Bangla language. Some teachers believe that if they can ‘read and write’ English well then, they have a good knowledge over English language. But it won't help them in a healthy conversation in English because having a good knowledge over a language means to be able to communicate in that language.

Some students misinterpret that writing and speaking skills are same as in both of these one need to be a creative thinker. When students were asked how much are they confident about their speaking and listening skills. In reply one of them shares that "I can read and write English very well so I know I won't face much problem regarding my speaking and listening". The logic behind the answer is that as she can produce new sentences and think of creative things in writing so she will also be able to produce sentences while speaking also. Similarly, if someone can read the words accurately then she can also catch the correct words while listening.

Teacher A told that "having good command over grammar does not help students' in fluent speaking. For example, a student knows the grammatical rules very well but if she is asked to talk about a topic, it is possible that she will do mistakes in sentence arrangements. When a student learns language rules then it may help him or her in writing but without practicing listening and speaking, he or she cannot improve her or his oral skill.

4.3. Implementation of Formative assessment

Formative assessment is a process in which teachers give continuous feedback to the students. Teacher B mentioned that "formative assessment can help students to overcome their language fear gradually. Whether the feedback is positive or negative it is necessary to provide it on the spot so that learners can catch it easily". Tang (2016) stated that proper implementation of formative assessment can "relieve students' speaking apprehension" (P. 755). However, student F believes that "formative assessment system is fruitful to alleviate our English-speaking difficulty". She added that in their school and college they were familiar with summative assessment. In this process, they were given a final score without informing their problem areas in the classroom activities. But, at the university level they are evaluated by formative assessment. Besides, student C shared that his teacher provides them feedback immediately after

finishing any oral task. It helps them to know about how and what problems to overcome.

Moreover, they are advised to maintain a portfolio that will keep records of their strength and weak sides of their language skills.

4.4. Classroom size and time limitation:

The classroom size of most of the high schools and colleges are large. So, it's difficult for a single teacher to maintain a large classroom. Participant D shares that "We have 40 students in our section. All of us don't get the equal chance to solve our problems by the teacher. Students who can sit in the front benches get more facilities. On the other hand, students sitting in the back benches often pass the class in gossiping as teachers pay little attention to them". Student G told that – "We get less than 2 years to finish our higher secondary level. During this period of time we have to complete both English 1st paper and 2nd paper. Moreover, there are lots of item in our syllabus in which we have to focus on. Besides, we also have to memorize long compositions, paragraphs, dialogues and completing stories".

According to teacher A, "the allocated time for the class is not enough to assign students' different types of tasks. Besides, the teacher shared that in the beginning of the year they are provided with a course plan from the board. In that course plan it is designed on which items they have to teach in the classroom. They follow that and teach accordingly. "As there remains only reading and writing tasks; speaking and listening activities are totally ignored, so finding no way we also have to ignore practicing the oral skills in the classroom. Teacher 'B' said that "our main focus is on how to finish the syllabus on time. So, if we try to make students practice speaking or listening activities then it will have an effect on the syllabus and more importantly students will also be against it".

4.5. Mismatch between curriculum and testing system

According to the NCTB, the book is designed following CLT method in which all the four language skills - reading, writing, listening and speaking are present. Its' aim is to make learners communicatively competent in English language. But the testing system doesn't match with the curriculum. According to the teacher B- "Though the objectives of the curriculum is to teach all of the four skills but the syllabus acknowledge only two sides-reading and writing". Besides, in the mark distribution of English language tests there is no mark required for speaking and listening activities. If speaking and listening skills are given less importance by the education policy then it is obvious that the teachers and students will also pay less attention on it. Teacher A asserts that it is high time the testing system of English language tests should be changed. The ministry of education should include the other two skills (speaking and listening) in the test content.

Besides, participant H told that, "I think it is unnecessary and waste of time to practice those skills which are not evaluated in the exam". Another college student feels the importance of testing oral skill in the public examination. According to her, if the test includes speaking and listening skills then our institution and teachers will also feel the importance of teaching these two skills. Green (2007) stated that high-stake tests are responsible for narrowing the school curriculum as it enforces teachers to teach only the test related items.

4.6. Impact of students' motivation:

Motivation is important in English language learning. If students do not feel motivated then they will fail to achieve the desirable attitude towards learning the foreign language. When the interviewee students were asked if they feel motivated in learning the English language as a

mode of communication; most of them gave negative responses. One of them has shared that “teachers do not motivate us to communicate in English language inside or outside the classroom. We are learning English as a compulsory subject for passing in the exam”. Another university student has shared that-

I have habit of watching English movies and series. So, I thought it is helping me to improve my English language skills. But, when I started to communicate in English with my friends and faculties in my university, I become to realize that I have lot of problems in my grammar and fluency. After learning about this problem, I started to feel demotivated to speak in English. Now, I am working hard to solve this problem. I think if I got the chance to practice oral English in our schools or colleges then it would be easier for me to overcome my speaking problems.

Another university student said,

Before admitting into university, I was not concerned about my speaking and listening skills. I only bothered about my reading and writing skills which were important to carry a good grade on the examination. I remember my father used to advise me to watch English News and movies and to practice English speaking at home. But I thought it was a waste of time. Now, I have to do an English foundation course, which is offered by my University, because of my poor performance on speaking and listening.

4.7. Impact of teachers’ motivation:

The teachers were asked- Do they motivate their students to speak in English in the classroom? In reply teacher 'A' said "if the students don't feel interested to speak in English then it is difficult to motivate them. Besides, some of them feel very shy to talk in the class". The

other teacher responded that "it is tough to engage students in oral communication who have very little knowledge over vocabulary, fluency and grammar".

4.8. Spending excessive time on test preparation

One of the biggest problems in Bangladeshi education system is that here institutions and teachers waste excessive time on taking examinations of students. As a result, students remain busy in practicing the items that are important for the examinations. Imposing too many exams can put intolerable pressure on students. Students E stated that "in our college we have to give several quizzes and mock tests similar to the public examination format". According to the teacher 'A', "tests work as a shaper for learning". Students can get a similar experience of the board exams before appearing on the test. Another teacher believes that "practice tests help students in time management". Also, the more tests they will give the more mistakes they can find and solve them.

4.9. Uninterested in learning English language

The participant reveals that most of them do not enjoy learning English as like other subjects. One of the reasons is the boring process of learning which is followed by GTM method. One of the participants told that "I feel monotonous in the class. Every day we have to do the same tasks in the class which are either to memorize writing parts or to solve the test paper". Moreover, there are some students who view English as a second language and so they do not feel interested in achieving communicate competence in English as like their mother tongue.

4.10 Failure in making effective communication in English

For being an effective communicator, it is important to be clear and competent while speaking. Findings shows that Bangla medium students often face difficulty to communicate

effectively with their teachers and peers. Knowing the grammatical rules, sentence structure and tons of vocabulary is not enough for fluent communication, rather it is a matter of practice.

Student G shares her experience of giving viva in a private university -

“I gave an admission test in a private university and got selected in the written part. After 1 week they called me for a viva. Unfortunately, my English-speaking skill was too bad. As a result, I could not deliver my answers properly in English that I was asked for. I became very nervous at that time. Therefore, they rejected me”.

Student F stated that it is necessary to practice oral skills during our college level. After giving the final exam we get very little time which is not enough to prepare ourselves. Consequently, we get into trouble with our limited oral skills at the university level. According to Swain (1985), output is necessary in language acquisition as learner can understand their gap while producing output and will try to solve that.

4.11. Teaching strategy and learning materials:

The teacher used GTM and ALM method in the class. The teaching aids were white board, marker, exercise book and note book. The name of the book was “Advanced learner’s HSC Communicative English Grammar & Composition” which is written by Chowdhury and Hossain. After entering the class, the teacher greets the students and told the students to open their exercise book in English language. Then he started to read a passage from the exercise book and using Bangla translation. He was focusing on the exam related contents rather than the language related items. Besides, no authentic material was used by the teacher. The sitting arrangement of the students was not suitable for group discussions. They were in rows facing the teacher.

5. Chapter Five: Discussion

In this section, I have added my own opinion, and I built a linkup between the research questions and the findings that directed this whole qualitative research.

5.1. Making curriculum-based testing system

The findings reveal that there is a major mismatch between the curriculum and the testing system of Bangladesh. The curriculum that is designed by NCTB follows CLT method of teaching. They have set two objectives for the students. They are- 1. Making students communicatively competent in all the four language skills, and 2. Make them capable for doing effective communication in real life setting. But the teaching and learning of English language is not driven by the curriculum rather it is dominated by the national examination system. In the national examinations, students are obligated to give exams on two papers (English 1st paper and 2nd paper). Each of these papers contains 100 marks. In the 1st paper – 60% marks is allocated to evaluate reading skill (MCQ, short question, flow chart, summarizing, fill in the gaps, rearranging) and 40% is for writing skill (paragraph, completing story, email, describing graphs and critical appreciation of poem). In the 2nd paper, 60% marks in on grammar and 40% marks on writing part. The marks distribution of these two English exams shows that there is no mark allocated for speaking and listening parts. Ali (2014) has done his research on textbook evaluation. His research findings reveal that the goals claimed by the curriculum are inconsistent as the textbook lack authentic materials for practicing the oral skills. Similarly, in the test content there is also the absence of speaking and listening parts.

As a result, both teachers and students emphasize on the writing and reading skills. The participants also shared that as oral skills are totally left out in the question paper so they do not

feel any necessity of practicing the speaking and listening skills. Besides, they think practicing oral skills is a “waste of time” (participant H). So, it is important to bring a connection between the curriculum and testing system.

5.2. Ensuring quality education

The education system of our country has become exam centered. It does not focus on the quality of education that students are receiving from the institutions. 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. 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 (p.538). English is being taught in the classes to prepare them to achieve a higher grade in the exam; not to make them competent in using the language in daily life. There are many students who pass the high-stake tests with a golden GPA 5 but still have poor proficiency on the language skills. This happens because students are kept busy on giving exams and proving their memorization skill rather making improvement on the language skills. On the other hand, teachers align the curriculum and taught their students only the items that are important for the exam. They provide suggestions and practice sheets which restraint them to read and practice the items from the textbook. Thus, students are gathering knowledge through memorization. But they are not learning how to implement that knowledge in real life situation. According to Tahreen (2014), “Learners "knowledge application skill, analytic skill, and critical thinking ability" are given less importance in the Bangladeshi testing system”.

However, parents are also concerned about their child's higher grades on the high-stake tests. From the start of their student life, they must face the pressure of high-stake exams. Teachers and institutions also pressurize students to achieve good grades in the public exams, because it carries institutional prestige as well. Students are admitted into the coaching centers to give model tests before participating in the national exam. Besides, they practice past examination question papers, model questions and test papers that are only reading and writing based. Students' spend excessive time in preparing themselves for the public exams which hamper their maximum time for learning. Tahreen (2014) states that most of the teachers start to prepare their students for sitting in the exam before two or three months of the exam. Her research findings show that "55% English teachers spend more than 50% time of their total class time in test preparation. Besides, 18% teachers spend 50% and 27% teachers spend less than 50% class time in test preparation" (p. 168). Thus, teachers cannot give focus on students' language learning. There is a negative view of teachers is that "tests work as a shaper for learning" (teacher B). Teachers also think that tests help students to find out their mistakes and teach them about time management. However, they do not realize the fact that over-testing practice is hampering their language learning process.

5.3. Adaptation of modern teaching methods

Another problem with teaching the oral skills are the large number of students in class and the short class time. The interviewee students stated that their classroom size is big and their teacher can't give equal treatment to all of the students. In order to teach speaking and listening skills it is very important to focus on the students' activity. If the teacher wants to improve his students' speaking skill then he has to motivate them to speak in English inside and outside the classroom. But it will be difficult for the teacher to guide lots of students at a time. Moreover, the

class time is also limited. As their main emphasis is on finishing the syllabus it is not possible to practice speaking and listening separately in that short period of time. The teachers told that they are obligated to finish the syllabus on time. So, they don't have the freedom of teaching. They have to follow the way of institutional teaching. So, even if the CLT method of teaching was introduced in Bangladesh many years ago and the textbook is also designed by following the CLT method; but the education system is still following the GTM and ALM method of teaching. In GTM, grammar rules are taught in a deductive way. Moreover, in this method there is no scope for student-student interaction as the class is directed by the teachers' instructions only. Besides, the question format also doesn't follow the CLT method. That's why teachers don't want to switch into the CLT method. However, there are a lot of teachers, especially from the rural sides, who don't know how to teach in the CLT method. One of the teachers has stated that they don't get proper training from the government which can improve their teaching strategy. Moreover, he also highlighted an important point that there are still many teachers who do not have confidence on their English- speaking proficiency.

5.4. Qualified teachers

Besides, most of the teachers who teach the English subject; not all of them are from ELT majors. As Islam et.al (2011) has stated that “teachers without degrees in ELT will struggle to understand the complex nature of language teaching and learning”. So, they don't understand the actual process of teaching a foreign language. However, in his research observe that "The university students disgrace the high -stake testing system of Bangladesh. They strongly believe that the question format of the board exams should be changed. The participants have shared how they are struggling with their poor oral skills at their university level. However, Amin (2021) also has observed the similar problem in his research. According to him, teachers have

very limited knowledge on how to engage students in communication. So, introducing a new assessment method in the education system will not be easy.

Moreover, the non-existence of an English-speaking environment creates a major barrier for students' language development. English is considered as a second language in our country. As Bangla is our mother tongue everyone usually talks in Bangla except in instructions or official places. So, Classroom is the best place for students to practice English language. Unfortunately, secondary and higher-level students don't get the opportunity to do their conversations in English inside their classroom. According to Kabir, "ESL learners do not have the enough access to practice the TL in classroom and thus they feel insecure, fear, nervous and scared to speak in English". As participant B has shared that their teacher speaks in Bangla in the classroom. If the teacher himself doesn't talk in English then the students will not feel interested to speak in English. The teachers should use English language while delivering their lecture and encourage the students to practice speaking English. One of the teachers stated that he doesn't speak in English in the classroom because "many students will not understand his speech ". In the beginning students may face problems but if they start practicing speaking English with the teacher and among themselves; then gradually they can feel an improvement.

Not only in the classroom but students also can practice oral skills at home. Teacher B suggested that as there is low opportunity to make them practice oral skills in classroom so they themselves can try to improve their skills at home. "In this digital era there are several platforms from where students can learn vocabulary and pronunciation. It will help students in making longer sentences without hesitation". However, one of the participants has shared a trick that she applies to overcome her fear of speaking in English. She used to speak in English in front of the mirror. Canale and Swain (1980) have proposed that, communicative competence includes

grammatical competence i.e. purely structural knowledge about the language; discourse competence i.e. knowledge about inter-sentential relationship; sociolinguistic competence i.e. knowledge about the rules and norms governing the appropriate timing and realization of speech acts; and strategic competence i.e. the ability to compensate for imperfect knowledge of linguistic, sociolinguistic and discourse rules. The way high-stake English examination is designed it can bring students a high score rather achieving communicative skill in English language.

5.5 Modify test format

A good test must have to fill some characteristics. According to Sultana (2018), H.S.C English examination lacks the characteristics of validity, reliability, positive wash back, authenticity and usefulness. First of all, it does not have construct and content validity. It is because it is supposed to measure all the four language skills but in the exam it the test paper only focuses on reading and writing skill. Secondly, the exam is not reliable as there is constant up and down of the pass rate. Thirdly, the texts given in the exam are not authentic. Moreover, it does not evaluate students' communicative ability in real life context. So, it also does not have the authenticity feature. Besides, the test result is only useful for the admission to the next level but it does not have any connection with real life achievement. Finally, the influence of this test is having a negative effect on the teaching and learning practices which is called negative washback. Jahan, Ahmed & Uddin (2017) states, "If the questioning criteria can ensure to reflect learning, the classroom instruction would be forced to ensure learning as well" (p.52).

To teach English, teachers only use the NCTB prescribed EFT textbook and Chowdhury & Hossain's exercise book. As the students stated that they practice past exam questions from the book so it is clear that they don't even follow the speaking exercises that are given in the

textbook. Grammar is also taught in deductive way following the exercise book. It is a matter of sorrow that in most of the institutions, students don't have excess of internet and multimedia projector. These digital aids play an important role in teaching speaking and listening skills.

According to Hoque (2016), in a language classroom interaction between teacher and students plays an important role. He did a class observation of higher secondary level students in Sylhet. He became disappointed noticing that students do not actively participate in the class discussion, neither have they asked questions to the teacher nor they give answers to the teacher's question. To observe students' oral communication potentiality, the sitting arrangement also plays a vital role. In most of the institution's students sit in a row facing the teacher. As a result, it is difficult for the teachers to monitor the back benchers. So, the sitting arrangements should follow u- shaped or horseshoe style. It fosters more collaboration between them and teachers can monitor all of them at a glance.

6. Chapter Six: Conclusion

To wrap up, the current English examination system of Bangladesh is not eligible to fulfill the curriculum goals. It put emphasis on evaluating learners' reading and writing skills, but the speaking and listening skills are not included. The question format follows the GTM method. The participants asserted that though the textbook is designed following CLT method but they are learning with GTM and ALM method. Besides, the given activities on the textbook are not practiced by the students rather the teaching is driven by the exam related contents. Moreover, both teacher and students do not focus on the language development. Their focus is on achieving higher grades in the test. Now, some students are feeling the importance of CLT based testing system. They believe if the testing system follow CLT method and speaking and listening skills are included in the English exams then the teachers and institutions will also give emphasis on the development of the oral skills. But, only changing the testing system is not the solution as many teachers are not still knowledgeable about Communicative Language Teaching method (CLT). So, they must be trained in CLT for effective use of teaching materials. Moreover, learners and teachers should know the necessity of oral skills development. So, a learning focused testing system should be implemented rather than a test focus.

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