

# Improving Writing Skills in English at the Tertiary Level: The Gap between the Standard Practice and Classroom Scenario

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## Abstract

Writing in English, especially writing creatively or independently, is usually a challenging endeavor for learners in the tertiary level classrooms in Bangladesh. The study aims at discovering the present scenario and the reasons for these challenges. This paper also prescribes to the learners some ways for developing writing skills so that they can apply them in their academic life. Data was collected using a questionnaire which was formulated on the basis of different processes of writing and classroom practice by the learners. The survey was conducted among the students who were studying or had taken language skills courses at the Department of English in a private university of Bangladesh. Based on the findings, some practical recommendations have been made for all three stakeholders: learners, teachers, and institutions.

**Keywords:** process writing, brainstorming, listing and clustering, looping, prereading, sharing, revising

In all considerations, writing is one of the must-learn-skills in all students' academic lives and for this reason, teaching writing has been taken as a very important curriculum objective in all the educational levels in Bangladesh, especially at the tertiary level. Interestingly, it has been observed that, in spite of putting an enormous amount of emphasis on developing students' writings, it has always been a challenging skill to most of the students. Gathering ideas, organizing them in the right order, maintaining the flow of writing, writing error-free and cohesive sentences, and using attractive expressions are some of the areas they face challenges in. All these problems and hindrances occur as most of the learners do not possess a good knowledge of the processes of writing. However, the problems can easily be overcome and the task can be very inspiring and interesting for them if they can follow some effective processes during writing. The primary goal of the study is to reveal the reasons for the inability to organize ideas and put them in writing. Another goal of the study is to find and explain the different processes of writing to help the learners find ways to overcome the challenges and to raise awareness among the learners and other stakeholders about how to develop writing skills. To reach the goals of the study the following research questions were posed:

**Research question 1:** What processes do the students follow in writing classes to develop their writing skills?

**Research question 2:** How much knowledge regarding different key concepts of writing do the students have?

**Research question 3:** What are the standard processes to be followed to develop writing skills?

To answer these questions, a brief survey was conducted at a tertiary level institute of Dhaka to elicit the views of the students. The survey results are presented and discussed in this paper. Finally, based on the findings and discussions, some implications for pedagogy have been highlighted.



## Literature Review

### ***ELT Policy in Bangladesh and the Ground Reality***

According to the University Grants Commission, Bangladesh has 40 public universities providing education to the bulk of higher studies students and there are 97 private universities that are operational in seven divisions of the country (2018). These universities put special emphasis on English because the language is in much demand in the national and international arenas. They are also interested in gaining financially by attracting students with their English-speaking environment.

Under National University, all the BA, BSc and BSS pass and honors students have to study a compulsory English course – General English of 100 marks and another course titled English for Specific Purposes (ESP) that will facilitate both their academic studies and future needs. In this regard, Hossain's (2013) observation also confirms the same. In the tertiary level institutions, students have to carry out a good number of writing tasks ranging from academic paragraphs and essays to different types of academic papers, reports, etc. Therefore, it is generally expected that students will be proficient in writing at this advanced level and their writing will be coherent, where the thoughts and ideas will be organized (Cohen & Miller, 2003). The reality, however, for Bangladeshi tertiary learners is that though they try to learn all the four language skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – writing is deemed the most difficult skill for them (Karim, Maasum & Latif, 2017). Regarding the teaching of writing in the tertiary level classroom, Sinha (2013) observes similar challenges faced by the tertiary level learners (p. 77). According to her, one such challenge is that they lack necessary skills and expressions for carrying out different writing tasks. Another challenge they face is the worry about making their grammar and language accurate. These challenges make writing difficult for them and cause inhibition to go ahead with their writing tasks.

In support of this view, Barman and Akhter (2014) opine that writing has always been a subject of aversion, dislike, and even hatred to the students except for those having a knack or passion for it. A similar view is also given by Alam (2007). He observes that it is often found that students may have knowledge about vocabulary and grammar (e.g., tenses, collocation, and prepositions) but they face problems in writing coherently and restructuring ideas after evaluating them. Bernstein (cited in Higgins, 2003) stated,

For most people writing is a lonely, frustrating and unhappy experience. The writer who actually enjoys the process of writing seems to be unusual. Most writers enjoy having written but get no joy whatever from the actual task of moving a pencil across a sheet of paper or hitting one key after another. (p. 8)

As language teachers we have also experienced that in the classroom whenever learners are asked to write on a topics related to daily life, they seem to be facing an intellectual challenge. A similar problem is identified by Barman and Akhter (2014). They hold that whenever the learners set out to write, they feel blank inside. They seem to be in the dark, groping for ideas but finding nothing. Most of the time they feel defeated and lost, which ultimately makes them frustrated, demotivated, and uninterested in writing (p. 100).

### ***Teaching Writing: The Process Approach***

To meet the challenges of L2 writing and develop skilled L2 writers, various approaches to writing have so far been introduced by different scholars. Two of the most common approaches are product approach and process approach. Product approach values the construction of the end product as the main focus rather than the process of writing itself (Harmer, 2011, pp. 325-326).

Harmer holds that many scholars, however, advocate a process approach to writing in the ESL context. In light of the process approach, writing is viewed as a “thinking process” (Brown, 2001, p. 336). In this approach, emphasis is given on writers’ creativity and “the cognitive relationship between the writer and the writers’ internal world” (John Swales, 1990, p. 220). Stressing the importance of the process approach, Brown (2001) regards it as useful to students in language learning and states that in the process approach students become able to manage their own writing because they get a chance to think as they write. In this approach students’ writing on a given topic is not limited by time constraint. As Raimes (1983) states, “while writing in the process approach students do not have any restriction of time ... rather they explore a topic through writing” (p. 10). This approach puts emphasis on the various stages that any piece of writing goes through. While talking about the benefits of the process approach, Harmer (2011) opines that, by spending time with learners on pre-writing phases, editing, re-drafting, and finally producing a finished version of their work, a process approach aims to get to the heart of the various skills that most writers employ (pp. 325-326).

Processes work as tools needed for discovering ideas. These can help the learners overcome their inhibitions and open the fountain of ideas concealed inside them to guide them forward in the proper direction. In this study, writing has been presented as a process, not as a product, which helps a learner to begin with the generation of ideas and move forward till the accomplishment of the task.

Tribble (1996) states that “although there are identifiable stages in the composition of most extended texts, typically writers will revisit some of these stages many times before a text is complete” (p. 38). So, after analyzing various frameworks and models of the writing process, it can be said that there are five key stages involved in writing. These are pre-writing, drafting, revising, editing, and sharing. In the pre-writing stage, students are encouraged to cultivate their creativity. They are also allowed to think about what main points they should focus on and which dimension of the chosen topic they should approach.

Brown (2001) suggests the following classroom activities for the pre-writing stage: brainstorming, listing, clustering, free writing, reading (extensively) a passage, skimming and/or scanning a passage (p. 348).

In the drafting stage, learners try to generate ideas and write them down without being concerned about grammatical or mechanical errors. Producing ideas, organizing them, developing a theme, evolving a plan, taking audience into account, and getting started are the sort of activities that writers do to write the first draft (Tribble 1996, p. 113). The later drafts will receive feedback from teachers and peers.

The revising process is also part of the writing process. Tompkins (1990) describes the revision process as “Revision is not just polishing writing; it is meeting the needs of readers through adding, substituting, deleting, and rearranging materials” (p. 83).

Editing is considered one of the most important stages in an ESL classroom where students pay attention to mechanics, checking for grammar, spelling, choice of words, and punctuation.

In the sharing stage, students share their writing with their teachers, their fellow learners, and other readers outside the classroom. According to Tompkins (1990), by sharing their completed written products with peers, friends, or family, students can develop a real communication between themselves and their readers.



Acknowledging writing as a process, different researchers propose varied models of writing strategies. However, though the scholars use different terms and connotations, they refer to more or less the same strategies. Brainstorming or generating ideas or discovering the thesis, listing ideas or developing support or focusing, scaffolding or making an outline, branching and looping or organizing, free writing and mapping, drafting, evaluating, revising, redrafting, jigsaw writing, editing or correcting, and improving the first draft, preparing the final version are some prominent strategies suggested by the researchers (Barman & Akhter, 2014; Byrne, 1988; Hedge, 1988; Heffernan, Linclon & Atwill, 2001; Langan, 2005; McDonough & Shaw, 2003; and Miller, 1999).

Having studied all these prominent strategies, however, we focused mainly on the following strategies in our study:

1. **Brainstorming:** This is the most common strategy for generating ideas. Through brainstorming, learners list all the ideas related to a topic. In this stage, the learners will write freely based on their outlines. They will generate ideas and write the first set of sentences without bothering much about grammatical and organizational accuracies. Very simply, brainstorming means beginning with a topic or idea, putting pen to paper, or fingers to the keyboard, and scribbling down whatever comes to mind.
2. **Listing and clustering:** In this stage, learners explore a subject through a picture of related ideas and an outline of connections. All relevant ideas are listed in the form of words and phrases. The listed words and phrases are grouped and, thus, a process of links is created. It is a process of moving from general ideas to specific areas. It is also a process of streamlining thoughts. It allows the writer's mind to meander to the detailed ends of an idea. As a whole, it is a way of developing and grouping ideas.
3. **Pre-reading:** This is a very useful strategy which help writers expand their horizon of knowledge. This always gives them the opportunity to be updated with the latest knowledge and the thoughts of other people regarding the topic. Reading is always helpful for the writer to generate creative ideas.
4. **Drafting and organizing ideas:** Discovering a thesis often through prewriting, providing solid support for the thesis often through more prewriting, organization of the thesis and supporting material, and writing it out in a first draft are a very pragmatic set of strategies for the writer to produce effective and organized writings. Without doing this, writers will not be able to produce any well thought and well directed writing, and ultimately will lose their readers' attention.
5. **Cooperating and sharing ideas with co-learners and teachers:** At the planning stage, sometimes sharing ideas with co-learners and teachers help learners to form better ideas and have greater insight into the subject matter. So, for the learners who keep struggling for ideas and structures of writing, it can be a very useful strategy to develop their writing. The same strategy can also be employed during the whole process of writing whenever needed.
6. **Revising:** Revision is the stage in the writing process where learners review, alter, and improve their messages which have been drafted. Revision follows drafting and precedes editing. Drafting and revising often form a loop as a writing task moves back and forth between the two stages.
7. **Editing and proofreading:** Editing involves examining each sentence carefully, and making sure that it is well designed and conveys the right message. Proofreading is an

active part of editing that involves checking for grammatical and punctuation errors, spelling mistakes, etc. Proofreading is the final stage of the writing process.

### Research Methodology

In the survey the focus was the writing process – the strategies which tertiary level learners should follow in order to produce a balanced piece of writing. Quantitative method was employed in the investigation. The data were collected from students through a survey.

**Participants:** The participants in this study were the students of different batches of the BA Honors in English program at a private university in Dhaka. The participants were randomly selected on the basis of their response to an invitation to participate in the study.

**Data Collection Method:** In the study, 101 students from six batches participated. Before administering the questionnaire, students were briefed about the background of the study. The questionnaire was carefully designed to ensure that it included all questions on major and important techniques required for the development of writing skills. While conducting the survey, we made sure that the respondents understood the questions and the options well. They were allowed to ask questions so that they could get their confusions cleared. The results of the survey were collected and then tallied on SPSS. The results are displayed in percentages in the following pie charts.

### Data Analysis

#### *Students' Interest and Confidence to Undertake a Writing Task*

The pie chart (Figure 1) shows that less than 22% of the focus group students feel keenly interested and confident to undertake a writing task while 47% have a moderate interest in writing. About 32% students do not possess much interest in undertaking a writing task.

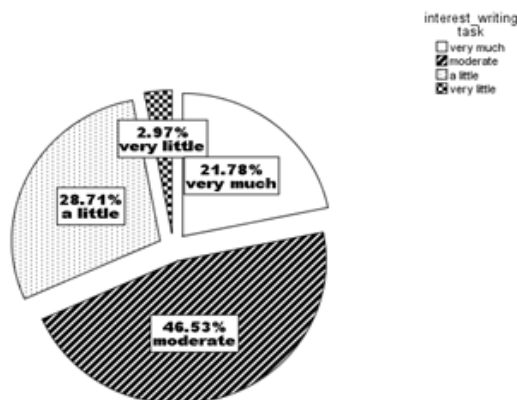


Figure 1: Possessing Interest

### Brainstorming

Figure 2 shows that over 43% of the students who participated in the survey always brainstorm while they write and over 50% of the students brainstorm sometimes. The survey also reveals that about 5% of the respondents never brainstorm.

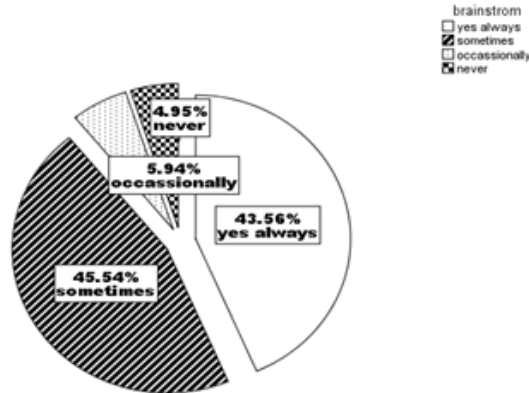


Figure 2: Brainstorming

### Knowledge about Listing and Clustering

Listing and clustering is again another important technique for the generation and organization of ideas. Figure 3 shows that 48% of the respondents are unaware of the technique. In contrast, it is found that about 44% of them have some idea about listing and clustering.

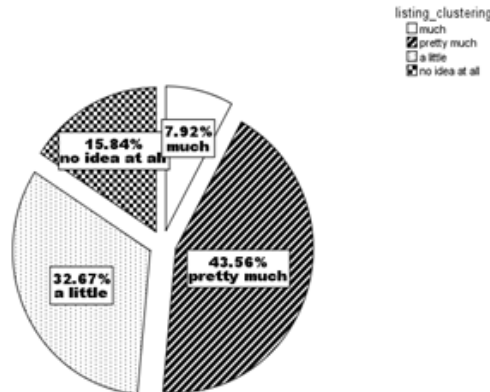


Figure 3: Listing and Clustering

### Reading as a Pre-writing Activity

From Figure 4, it is clearly seen that about 55% of the respondents read relevant literature before the writing task they undertake while about 45% of the respondents do not take reading as a serious prewriting activity.

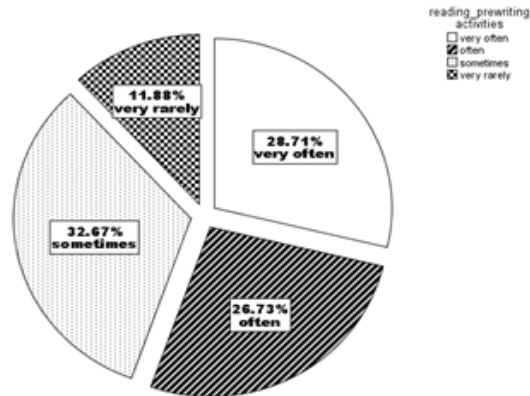


Figure 4: Reading as a Prewriting Activity

### ***Concern about Grammatical and Mechanical Errors in the Drafting Stage***

When the participants were asked about their concern over grammatical and mechanical errors during the drafting task, over 75% of them stated that they were concerned about these issues though almost 25% showed little concern over grammatical and mechanical errors (Figure 5).

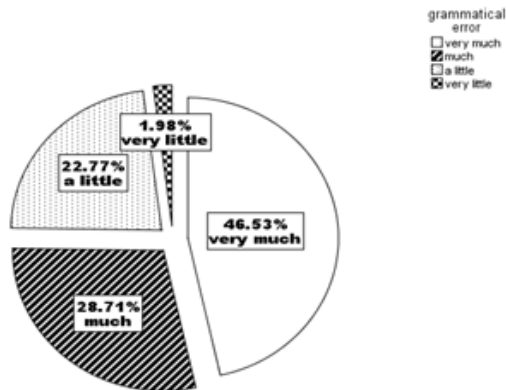


Figure 5: Concern over grammatical and mechanical errors in the drafting stage

### ***Effort Given to Organize the Ideas and Develop a Theme for Writing***

From Figure 6, we can see that about 64% students put emphasis on organizing ideas in the prewriting stage while 36% students do not do so. Though a majority of students put due emphasis on organizing ideas, the percentage of the students who do not do so is also not negligible.

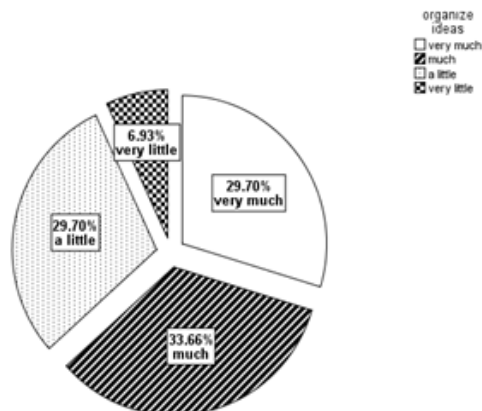


Figure 6: Organizing ideas

**Effort Employed in Collecting Feedback from Teachers and Peers while Producing the First and Succeeding Drafts**

From Figure 7, we can have another significant scenario about the strategies students adopt during their writing tasks. Collecting feedback from peers and teachers is one of the important strategies of developing writing skills. According to the survey, we can see that 43% students collect feedback during writing, while majority of the students (57%) do not care much about collecting feedback from their friends and teachers during the developmental stage of writing.



Figure 7: Collecting feedback from peers and teachers

**Revising Writing**

According to Figure 8, we see that very few students have a comprehensive idea about revising writing. Though, in the ideal sense, revising means making an overall development of the work, very few students have such a comprehensive idea about it. In spite of this, it is worth mentioning that about 76% students feel that revising means meeting learners’ needs though it is partially true for the definition of revising.



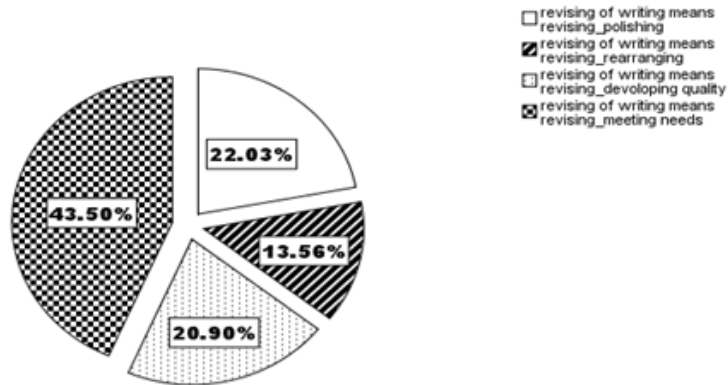


Figure 8: Meaning of revising writing

### Learners' Effort during Revision

From Figure 9, we see that about 65% students revise their writings and the rest 35% do not care much about it. Though a majority of students do revise, their writings are not much improved by their task of revising as they only have a partial idea about the process.

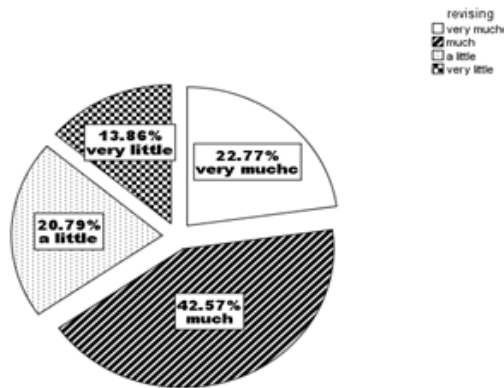


Figure 9: Putting emphasis on revising

### Editing and Seriousness in Editing Writing

Editing as a writing strategy has always been neglected. However, it is an important technique to help develop writing skills. It is usually implemented after the first draft. From Figure 10, regarding editing, it is seen that a large portion of learners has a clear idea about editing their work. But from Figure 11, it is revealed that majority of the students (almost 65%) do not take editing very seriously. 52% of them sometimes edit their writing and 13% never do it. Only a minor group of students consisting of just above 35% edit their writing.



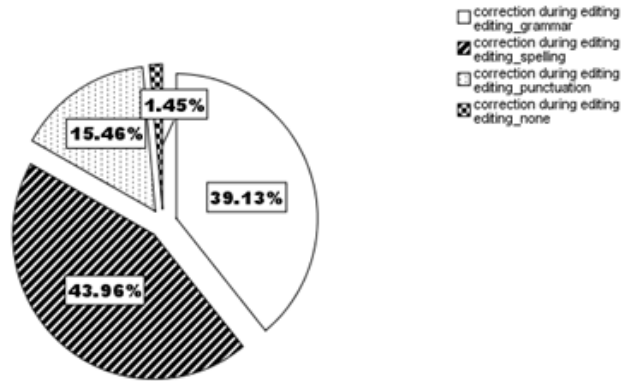


Figure 10: Correction during editing

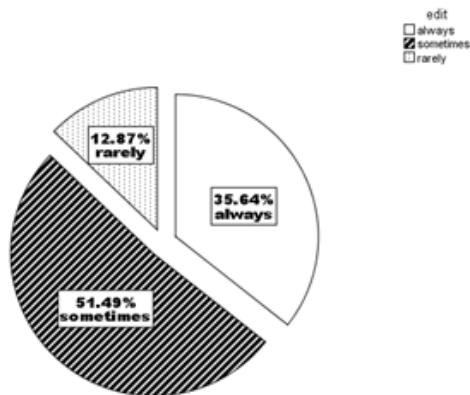


Figure 11: Percentage of students who do editing in the proper manner

### ***Dependency on Memorized Material or Rote Learning***

Figure 12 shows that almost all of the students, except an insignificant number, are somehow dependent on their memory. 28% students are always dependent and 53% of them are sometimes memory-dependent while only 19% students are found to be creative. They think while writing.

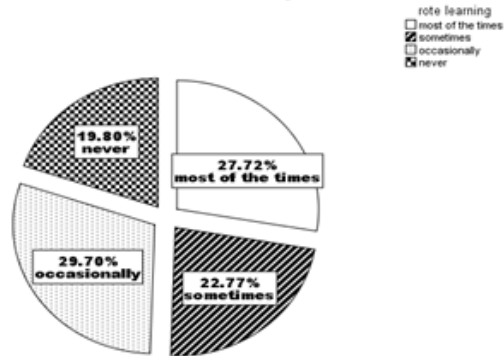


Figure 12: Using rote learning or memorized material

## Discussion

Our survey mainly focused on the most common processes used in generating ideas and developing students' creative writing faculty. The major findings are given below.

It is found that the lack of idea about writing processes and lack of interest or motivation are some of the major obstacles in the development of students' writing skills. So it can be deduced that students' proper knowledge and awareness of writing processes and their application in their academic life will help students overcome their inhibitions to gradually equip them to be successful writers.

The data also show that though a large number of students brainstorm while they write, a fairly large number of the students are unaware of the technique of listing and clustering. This implies that they are unable to create and organize their ideas well.

It is also clearly evident that though about half of the students read relevant literature before the writing task they undertake, a similar number of the students do not take reading as a serious pre-writing activity. Reading, as a rich input provider, always helps learners gather and enrich their knowledge. So it can be said that a big portion of the learners are deprived of such input which may work as a hindrance to the qualitative development of their writing ability.

It is also seen that, in the drafting stage, majority of the students remain concerned about grammatical and mechanical errors which affect the use of their creative faculty. The present teaching-learning contexts and pedagogical methodologies cannot help the learners to overcome the fear.

The survey further shows that though some students collect feedback from their peers and teachers while they write, majority of the students do not care much about this. The lack of a proper teaching-learning environment and proper support are to be blamed for this.

It is also clear that very few students have a comprehensive idea about revising their writing. Though a majority of students do revise their writings, their writings are not much affected or improved by their revisions as they only have a partial idea about the process. Also, many learners have a clear idea about editing writing but a majority of them do not take editing very seriously. Though a good number of students edit their writing sometimes, some students never do it.

The data also displays a very disheartening picture. The factor, dependence on memory, is one of the greatest hurdles in developing writing skills. Almost all of the students except an insignificant percentage are dependent on their memory which, without any doubt, works as a big impediment to their being creative.

The results presented in this paper were the findings of a small scale study and thus cannot be generalized. Nevertheless, the findings are useful in that they provide an insight about the deficiencies that tertiary level learners have in developing their writing skills. The study also reveals a gap between the standard practice in developing writing skills and the classroom scenario. Based on the findings of the study, some implications for pedagogy are presented.

### **Implications for Pedagogy**

Good writing ability requires a wide range of skills which consist of a deep passion, creative uses of language, appropriate knowledge of syntax, proper idea of the context, and the needs of the readers. The development of good writing skills results from intensive practice and application of appropriate techniques. A learner's writing skills are also largely dependent on reading skills which helps the learner to generate ideas, be introduced to different styles of writing, and access a wide range of creative vocabulary. So a very strong recommendation for the development of writing skills is to get the learners involved in different kinds of interesting reading activities in writing lessons, libraries, and homes. It is also very useful to teach the learners different strategies of writing and to use one or more technique effectively whenever they are engaged in writing. Classrooms can offer the scope for this purpose. However, it is very important that all members of an educational institution – teachers, learners and the institution itself – play their respective roles in this connection. Some of the recommendations in this regard are given below.

According to Hefferman et al. (2001), one of the significant roles for a teacher is to create a congenial environment so that learners become encouraged to write. Nunan (2003) suggests some principles that every teacher can consider while planning a writing course. Some of the principles are: understanding students' reason for writing, providing sufficient opportunities for students to write, making feedback helpful and meaningful, and declaring how students' writing will be evaluated (p. 92).

Being conversant with the principles and approaches of writing strategies is a must for language teachers. For this to happen, teachers must engage in both in-house and external teacher development programs. Teachers should also play the role of a motivator and feedback provider. They should make their lessons engaging and provide a variety of interesting reading and writing tasks to help their learners become passionate writers. Oxford's (1990) Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) can be adopted by classroom teachers for this purpose as, in Bangladeshi contexts, in most cases, teachers are the last resort for providing a helpful learning environment in the classrooms which generally lack many facilities required for students' skills development.

Learners also need to follow some strategies to develop their writing. They need to enrich themselves with appropriate knowledge about different categories of writing and writing processes. They have to develop an extensive reading habit and expand their vocabulary. A habit of note-taking will also help them be creative and organized with their ideas. Writing journals, short stories, and writing on other relevant issues regularly should be an important part of their academic life. Proper understanding of classroom tasks, being engaged in group work with peers and taking

their feedback, and teachers' feedback should be taken as another compulsory part of students' academic life.

Institutions need to try their best to create a congenial learning environment. They need to facilitate effective learning by providing trained teachers and ample sources of reading materials, thereby opening different windows to encourage writing activities. Classrooms and libraries must be equipped with modern technological devices and appropriate updated resources. Policies for interpersonal interactions should be devised, implemented, and evaluated in an appropriate manner.

### Conclusion

The study has explored and described the teaching and learning situations of writing in the tertiary level. The study shows that majority of the students are unaware of the required knowledge of writing processes. Though some of the students have some understanding of different writing strategies, a large number of them do not know how to carry out these techniques. Another core finding is that, in the drafting stage, a majority of the students remain too concerned about grammatical or mechanical errors and, consequently, it works as a hindrance towards the development of students' creative faculty. These worries could be minimized through adopting another strategy, cooperative learning, but evidently this practice is also largely absent from classroom teaching. Another remarkable finding is that a majority of the students depend on rote learning. This limitation can easily be connected to the lack of a proper teaching-learning environment in the institutions and inadequate support from the teachers.

Learners need to be much more self-conscious and have a deeper understanding of the objectives of writing courses and the appropriate processes of writing skills. They need to build up a rapport with the teachers and take necessary assistance from them. Teachers also need to extend their supporting hand towards the students, and provide interesting study resources and a motivational classroom learning environment to expedite students' writing and creative skills.

Though this paper has brought out a good number of findings about the deficiencies the learners have in their writing skills and some crude classroom teaching-learning scenario, it has some limitations too in terms of samples, instruments, and task types. It represents the findings from only one university. If the samples had been drawn from some more institutions, the paper might have given more comprehensive and reliable results. For future research, this paper proposes to include more tertiary level institutes and to use more instruments like writing samples of the learners, interview data from teachers and students, and data from focused group discussions for developing a richer database and more valuable findings.

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## Appendix

### Questionnaire for the students:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Batch: \_\_\_\_\_

Program: \_\_\_\_\_ Department: \_\_\_\_\_

University: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone No.: \_\_\_\_\_

*Tick the right option/ options as answers to the following questions.*

**1. How interested and confident do you feel about undertaking a writing task?**

Ans: a. very much      b. moderate      c. a little      d. very little

**2. Do you brainstorm whenever you begin to write?**

Ans: a. yes always      b. sometimes      c. occasionally      d. never

**3. How much knowledge do you have about listing and clustering as one of the important pre-writing activities?**

Ans: a. much      b. pretty much      c. a little      d. no idea at all

**4. How often do you take initiatives to do some reading of relevant areas as a prewriting activity?**

Ans: a. very often      b. often      c. sometimes      d. very rarely

**5. How concerned do you become about grammatical and mechanical errors in the drafting stage?**

Ans: a. very much      b. much      c. a little      d. very little

**6. How much effort do you give to organize the ideas and develop a theme for your writing?**

Ans: a. very much      b. much      c. a little      d. very little

**7. How much effort do you employ in collecting feedback from teachers and peers while producing the first and the succeeding drafts?**

Ans: a. very much      b. much      c. a little      d. not at all

**8. Which of the following do you think revising of writing means? (Mark all that apply)**

Ans: a. It is polishing writing.      b. It is rearranging ideas.      c. It is developing the quality of language.  
d. It is meeting needs of readers through adding, substituting, deleting and rearranging materials.

**9. How much effort do you employ in revising your writing?**

Ans: a. very much      b. much      c. a little      d. very little

**10. What do you do during the time of editing?**

Ans: **I correct:** a. grammatical errors      b. spelling errors      c. punctuation errors      d. none of them

**11. How seriously do you edit your writing?**

Ans: a. always      b. sometimes      c. rarely      d. never

**12. How much, in practice, do you depend upon memorized materials or rote learning while writing independently or creatively?**

Ans: a. most of the time      b. sometimes      c. occasionally      d. never

