

# Using Students' Answer Scripts in Developing Writing Skills at Tertiary Level: A Bangladeshi Perspective

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## Abstract

It is not unusual for the English Language teachers, especially in Bangladesh to come across students of different levels (advanced, intermediate, and beginner) in a class that makes it harder to plan any unique method to be applied for all of them at a time, especially in the case of teaching writing. A unique method in teaching writing is also unsuitable because there is a risk of having some demotivated students. Consequently, the task becomes challenging for the teacher as the outcome of students' achievement is inadequate. While expertise in English calls for developing four skills – reading, writing, listening, and speaking – in Bangladesh, there is hardly any noticeable or effective method being used developing those skills. Most importantly, little attention is paid to the implementation of effective teaching strategies to develop writing skills. This paper attempts to discuss and explore the potential of reusing students' written scripts in teaching writing. Students will engage with samples of earlier writing to identify and correct the grammatical and spelling mistakes, rearrange the ideas, and then reproduce it, thereby improving their writing skills. Students' written scripts, which are often disposed of after being checked, can be reproduced for the students to teach writing by allowing them to encounter different varieties of English language styles and common errors.

**Keywords:** Writing Skill, Teaching Strategies, L2, Demotivated Learner

## Introduction

Very few, if any, will disagree with the point that students' academic and future success cannot be achieved without their writing proficiency. Neither will anyone deny that in order to demonstrate excellence both in academic and professional domains, one, especially learners of English, both in Foreign Language and Second Language context, needs to have a good command over English. Writing skill is one of the sub-skills, also one of two productive skills, of English language proficiency. But the incentive to teach writing effectively has always been neglected and has even been relegated to a small part of the English Curriculum in Bangladesh. Although the policy makers such as the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) claim that the *English for Today* textbooks have been developed to help students attain competency in all four language skills, that is, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, little improvement is noticed in the demonstration of these skills practically. However, policy makers would be unwilling to admit that this approach is not helping the students to develop adequate linguistic competency, citing the introduction of CLT (Communicative Language Teaching), a type of language teaching methodology, (Richards, 2006) that aims to enable learners to communicate competently. To date, very few empirical studies have been conducted to determine the effect of any existing teaching strategies in Bangladesh. Nor has there been any attempt or research into either measuring the effect of CLT in developing writing skills or implementing innovative techniques to make the CLT approach fruitful. Moreover, the so-called test scores (most remarkably in the four public exams: PSC, JSC, SSC, HSC) do not necessarily reflect their writing competency effectively. The consequent result is their utter failure in the subsequent competitive entrance exams, like university entrance exams both at home and

abroad, leading our students most often to the “risk of academic failure” at tertiary level (Rumsey, 1998, p. 15). Dean Rumsey, quoting Jon Tompson, defines “at-risk” students as “having any one of the attributes such as unsatisfactory standardized test scores, below grade level performance in English language and communication skills, failing grades in core academic subjects” (p. 15).

As a university English teacher, I often have students of different competency levels in the classroom (advanced, intermediate, and beginner) that makes it harder to plan any unique method to apply to all of them at a time, especially in the case of teaching writing. Since I began teaching, I have encountered numerous students, either having English as their major or minor, pleading for a magic formula in a six-month-semester (24 classes), which would help them graduate (since the medium of instruction is English) and equip them with everything a proficient writer needs without toiling hard. Most students from various disciplines would express a desire to function in English-speaking academic settings as they wished to pursue higher studies abroad. Unfortunately, a large number of students who had been confident because their CGPA was high at the higher secondary level found themselves incapable when asked to write something on their own. Their written work is often full of grammatical and spelling mistakes, incoherent ideas, mixture of L1 (First Language) and L2 (English Language), and other problems. Sometimes their writing is so confusing that it goes beyond the examiners' comprehension. Certainly, students alone cannot be blamed as English is not their first language but it is the system that is producing this anomaly that should be held responsible.

### **Teaching strategies in developing writing skills in secondary and higher levels**

An evaluation of the present scenario in teaching English Language in all levels of education in Bangladesh confirms that it is mostly based on teaching formal grammar. A key component of primary, secondary, and higher English education in all government-run institutions is a mandatory inclusion of a workbook or grammar book with easy-to-solve exercises. What we have here is a system with an overemphasis on traditional grammar teaching and under-emphasized authentic writing activities. Popular modes of teaching writing in Bangladesh consists of, in Carpini's (2012) words in a different ELL context, rote instruction, grammar drills, and writing templates (pp. 98-99). Similar to many other ELL contexts, most instructors in Bangladesh, it seems, are reluctant to move from their “familiar zone of the old blue grammar book” as they can use common or less challenging activities of choosing the right answer or appropriate words, rather than authentic writing and reading tasks which call for experimentation in language usages (Carpini, 2012, p. 97). This confines the learners to the narrow domain of fill-in-the-gaps or the short answer form. There is little desire, both on the part of teacher and learner, to move beyond “traditional grammar instructions drills” and to “focus on authentic usages of language” (Carpini, 2012, p. 97). This affinity to grammar stems from the adherent notion that grammar-based study benefits the writers. Another fact might be the easy-to-handle nature of instruction for formal grammar. But the question is, how effective is the system in improving writing? Richard Braddock's significant remark best clarifies the result of teaching formal grammar in developing writing. He opines that the effect of teaching formal grammar with respect to English-as-a-second-language (ESL) and English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) is nothing but “negligible ... even harmful” (cited in Hillock, 1986, p. xv). Braddock's assertion is further implied by Hillock's (1986) research. In the

studies consulted by Hillock, nowhere did he find any evidence of the connection between formal grammar teachings and writing skills (p. 138). Perhaps we can evaluate the English teaching context of Bangladesh through the above lens where this kind of grammar drilling has been preferred and prescribed by the Education Board, administrators, and instructors all the while. The current teaching and learning preferences render no service to the learners; rather, they can be deemed “a gross disservice” (Hillock, 1986, p. 248). An examination of the questions in English Paper 1 and Paper 2 of the Board Exams (SSC) shows that the structure of the questions can be categorized as follows (also see Appendix A):

*Table 1: Topics in English Test Papers 1 & 2*

English Paper 1	English Paper 2
Choose the right word to complete a sentence	Fill in the gaps with articles
True or false	Complete the text with prepositions
Fill in the gaps with the correct form	Complete the sentences with suitable phrases (with clues)
Make a list of five objects	Complete the sentences with suitable phrases (without clues)
Write short answers to the questions	Fill in the gaps with the correct form of verbs
Fill in the gaps with suitable words	Transformation of sentences
Summary	Narration
Flow chart	Finding unclear pronouns
Fill in the gaps	Modifiers
Match	Use of appropriate sentence connectors
Rearrange	Synonym/Antonym
Paragraph Writing	Punctuation Application, Report, Paragraph, and Essay writing

Most of the question types here, except summary, paragraphs, and essay writing, do not call for any demonstration of authentic writing skills. Also, with these, students get little intensive practice and experience with the process of writing. Ferris and Hedgcock (2005) emphasize that language cannot be learned in isolation, but requires articulation in purposeful contexts. That these tasks in module practice contributes little to their writing development has been proved and emphasized on by theorists (Lunsford, 1987, p. 254). Thomas Friedmann’s (1983) argument can also be put forward here to prove the futility of this system, that the only criterion behind preferring grammar drilling is “inertia” (p. 399). The National Council of Teachers of English states that “isolated workbook exercises in usage is not supported by theory and research” and “is a deterrent to the improvement of the students’ speaking and writing” (cited in Gray, 2012, p. 19). I do not, however, object to the teaching of formal aspects of grammar or the contributions of the planners and policy makers of the current curriculum of Bangladesh. My focus in this paper is to make us see the relevance of current grammar instruction method in the development of writing.

Another aspect of the present system – a long drawn tradition-bound approach in teaching writing English in Bangladesh – is composition/paragraph writing which leads students to easily memorize some common topics only to pass exams and secure good grades. The problem that stems from this is that students can hardly demonstrate their true skills beyond the familiar memorized topic in any subsequent academic and professional field. Thus the good grades become a burden for

life. Our model of teaching basic writing seems to be, as Gray (2012) says, “Sentence- paragraph-essay” (p. 23). That English language teaching and learning in Bangladesh is completely “exam-oriented” draws student to the myopic domain of “solving, practicing and memorizing the examination style model test questions” (Chowdhury & Karim, 2014, p. 49). It is as if the prime motto is not manipulation or demonstration of earned knowledge in real life communication but to manage a grade which solely determines, ironically, social and academic recognition. As a result, most secondary and higher secondary students can hardly demonstrate proficiency levels much above elementary and the top scorer cannot be expected to handle language proficiently at all (Shahidullah, 2012, cited in Chowdhury & Karim, 2014, p. 49). Thus the ultimate outcome of memorizing and cramming may not be an optimistic one for most students as it eventually leads to demotivated learners at the tertiary level.

Little access to writing in schools also consequently damages students' authentic writing ability and self-confidence, accounting for their low quality writing skills at tertiary level. This claim can further be supported by Forseman's assertion (cited in Rumsey, 1988):

When students have had little experience writing in the school setting or when their writing has been inhibited by the fill-in-the blanks, they need to develop self-respect for their own generating power (p. 37).

Moreover, studies have found that students who are encouraged to express their own thoughts and ideas demonstrate highly functional and engaging literacy (Cox, Holden & Pecket, 1997; Rumsey, 1986). Thus, the most recurrent obstacles to writing development might be as follows:

1. Grammar Drill
2. Little exposure to writing habit
3. Format of writing test

What can be done then to produce less grade-conscious but more proficient learners, or less reluctant but more motivated writers from within the pre-existing system? There can be nothing as fruitful as the introduction of, as Gray (2012) puts it, “unremitting practice” in order to develop writing (p. 19). Since teacher-student ratios in most classes are remarkably high – the number ranging, mostly, from 70 to 100 – face-to-face or one to one contact time is hardly possible in most primary, secondary, and higher secondary classes. So, naturally, English language teachers who might have the desire to do something for the betterment of the students get little scope and support from, especially, professional environments with unmotivated authority, lack of equipment and space, overcrowded classrooms, and extra work-load, to implement it. Moreover, they may not be equipped with proper training and motivation to do something innovative. Thus, the question of how we can address the widely differing needs of the tertiary level students arises. Or how do we overcome the vacuity created in the existing teaching system? One possible remedy to the above mentioned problems lies in our shared concern to fill the gap by adopting any means possible.

### **Teaching tertiary level English writing in Bangladesh**

As English language teachers at tertiary level, what can we do with students who have already

passed their adolescence to make them meet the academic requirements and equip them for a professional life? The vital time for language learning has passed and students get little help from their natural ability to acquire the target language. The first decision should be to move from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach to lead the reluctant learners through the learning process. Teacher collaboration and a sense of shared responsibility are required to plan effective methods for this level and it is imperative that it is done soon. Otherwise, it might be a mammoth task to tackle the number of students who are at risk for academic failure. At this point, it is recommended that the length of students' exposure to writing activities be increased. Since numerous studies have found that a possible reason for students' inadequate writing skills is little access to writing (Cox, Holden & Pecket, 1997; Rumsey, 1998), it would not be unexpected for a student to have written nothing at all except in exam halls. Along with the increased writing exercises, it must be ensured that this strategy is applied consistently and rigorously (Rumsey, 1998, p. 77). We often regard giving lectures on how to write an essay or composition is sufficient for our students to be L2 writers as if that is the sole responsibility of a trainer. But it has been found that limited composition instruction alone cannot help improve students' writing literacy (p. 25). Short time instruction in class does not have any remarkable impact. The best suggestion is to provide more class time for writing and increase students' knowledge and use of the writing process. We can think about considering the following strategies while instructing the learners about writing (Shaunessy, 1977; Gray, 2012):

- a. regular practice at writing, instructing in writing process;
- b. exposure to models of similar writing;
- c. including skilled adult writers and classmates, peer or teacher collaboration at every stage of the writing process;
- d. one-on-one teacher student writing conference, students' engagement in writing activities at least three times a week.

After having discussed the pre-writing situation, I intend to draw the readers' attention to the state of post-writing activities; teachers' long-awaited assessments, and students' responses to this. Common and regular practices noticed in the departments are teachers publishing results as if to relieve themselves of the burden of huge bundles of scripts, with no other interaction with the students at that time except to distribute grades with students simply receiving the scripts, either with many red marks, or with some praise, along with the grades they deserve, involving high stakes as it will be included in the final grade. What is unusual, what could have been quite normal and mostly desirable here is teachers having a discussion, either one-on-one or in groups, about the problems they encountered, suggesting possible remedies, offering guidance for improvement, and motivating students. Instead, teachers always play the role of error hunters, not of a harbinger of improvement. Being completely oblivious to the fact that the purpose of the assessment is to improve students' learning, we seem to devote ourselves to grading them based on the language they are yet to learn. We are hardly aware that the assessment can offer diagnostic information for both students and teachers. Also, our methods for responding to students' written work are most often unsuitable, consequently demotivating learners (e.g., Krashen, 1985). A significant number of responses to the errors of the students are marked in red. These unsympathetic responses,

often rude to the involved because of the stigma it implies in peer groups, brings low morale and frustration. On the impact of error correction feedback, Gray (2012), citing Hillocks, says that the tone of many teacher's response, may often, "discourage students and lead them to write less" (p. 26). Moreover, the impact of error correcting feedback is not free from controversy. Though the impact of negative comments, as studies have confirmed, is destructive, the favorable effect of positive feedback has not yet been confirmed (Gray, 2012, p. 26). Then what impact does the process of checking scripts with marked errors bear on the chance of fruitful outcomes in writing development? This question might make teachers frustrated and disappointed as well as ponder over the question of how to deal with errors.

### **Reusing scripts for developing writing skills: Prospects**

While thinking about adopting an effective plan, I had in mind the following effective strategies asserted by Olson (1950, pp. 252-253): inductive teaching of sentences rather than memorizing rules; correction of written work rather than drill exercises; students proofreading rather than teacher correcting; and editorial correcting rather than using red pen or red ink.

To implement the strategies, written student work from earlier classes or assignments were considered a possible aid to teach writing skills to students at the tertiary level. However, this technique is not necessarily exclusive for the students of tertiary level. It can also be adopted at the primary and secondary levels, perhaps with slight variations based on the needs of their level.

### **Methods**

In this process, students were provided with the written scripts of either the previous batch or their own – from mid-semester work or class assignments – which are often thrown out or handed back to the students after grading. These evaluated scripts, of course, without any red marks or identifiable information, were reproduced for them as samples or models to work on (see Appendix B). Though a pair or group was assigned to work on or edit a sample script, each student was required to produce their own copy. Students could only consult with each other to improve and organize the content. They were also asked to look for problems created by lack of planning and drafting, and to comment on these on a separate sheet.

As writing skill involves both academic and writing discourse, and formal knowledge of grammar, this project was necessarily preceded by thorough instruction from the teacher (in this case, the researcher) who provided the steps in writing strategies and the salience of the revision procedure as well as how to focus on additions, substitutions, and rearrangements. Only after giving sufficient instructions or classes was this project implemented. Once students were given instructions on how to approach a given sample, the sample was assigned a particular code – either alphabetical or numerical – that would help the instructor to evaluate or compare the allotted sample and edited work. The work held the students' attention, giving them sufficient freedom to improvise written data, which facilitated students' involvement in producing a new piece of writing. Through their engagement in problem-solving in groups or pairs, they were expected to acquire the respective knowledge, skills, will, and self-regulation necessary for their own planning and revising.

### **Rationale for employing the script-reproduction strategy**

This strategy is primarily intended to have the learners engage in writing through draft-editing,

contrary to the prior isolated grammar-drill. Here the students get the opportunity to transfer their grammar knowledge through the use of writing. Writing script samples can be managed both by making the current-semester students write compositions on certain topics or taking any sample from previous semesters (as I often do). As the number of students in most of classes range from 65-75, pair or group work makes it easier to supervise easily. Also, this activity gives peer collaboration a purpose. That errors corrected by the student rather than the instructor has a greater significance has been proven by a study conducted by Lalande (1982). That peer assistance and discussion during revision has an impressive effect on student writing is supported by many studies as well (Hillock, 1996, p. 30).

Secondly, this strategy has the advantage of allowing a distinct view that encourages us to consider English language (L2) learning – either reading or writing – to be integrative, prompting learners to “use the material in a meaningful way in his or her life” (Esau & Keene, 1981, p. 697). As discussed earlier, an isolated exercise or drill can hardly help students demonstrate expertise in writing English. It can be done only when students acquire knowledge through practical use. The prospect of our proposed method which calls for students’ first-hand experience of dealing with error-correction, therefore, motivates learners to get involved in the process of writing.

Thirdly, script editing proved to have a greater scope for the students to focus on to correct the form and content. As they have to write drafts and make revisions constantly before final submission, they will have the opportunity to get involved in correcting and revising grammar usage and logical organization of ideas. This process of editing also makes a learner adept at identifying mistakes, as a result, contributing to their own error-correction regarding formal aspects of grammar, punctuation, and content. As Rosen (1987) says in “Developing Correctness in Student Writing: Alternatives to the Error-Hunt”:

Responsibility for the correctness of any given piece of writing should fall mainly on the student, not the teacher. Students learn to become accurate and self-sufficient writers by searching for, finding, and correcting their own mistakes. (p. 64)

Students may, initially, show a slower rate of progress or advancement in their error-correction or learning process, but, eventually, it will have a beneficial impact on the learners’ writing process. Usually, when a teacher takes responsibility of the task of detecting students’ mistakes, there is little motivation for students to learn from that error. There is no denying that learning occurs effectively with the practical experience of being involved in writing. This is affirmed by Rosen’s (1987) suggestion again that:

Students learn to write by writing, and they learn to write correctly by writing, revising, and proofreading their own work – with some help or direction from the teacher when necessary. They do not learn to write correctly by studying about writing or doing isolated workbook exercises unrelated to their own writing. (p. 64)

Above all, this project makes the class environment that of an interactive society, where the teacher ceases to be an all-knowing, ready-to-help, easy-to-approach robot-mentor and students assume the role of enthusiastic participants to learn from their mistakes. It is essential, says Zellermyer

(1989), that the writing class be a “rhetoric community” (p. 155) where both teacher and learner engage in a meaningful communication in their writing process, where learners see their errors as part of the developmental learning process that can be corrected and modified with experience.

### Conclusion

The sole purpose of this paper was to inform readers of the possibility of reusing students' response scripts in strengthening the writing skills of tertiary level students of Bangladesh. While the existing body of literature was explored and used to argue in favor of the possible significant gains in this strategy, the fact of time-constraint was not ignored completely. The stated strategy has some obvious limitations. It is time-demanding for the teacher and depends mostly on articulated tact to motivate the learners. But it has the prospect of facilitating the development of writing skills by engaging the learners in the process of self-correction. As this process incorporates a variety of errors and gives learners the authority to provide a correct form by rearranging and reorganizing a given sample, it becomes an interesting learning venture of sample-editing. Above all, a teacher can exercise the freedom to determine the sample based on students' competency levels. Thus, there is no fear of ending up with a group of demotivated students because it is largely a student-centered approach where a teacher only plays the role of facilitator and mentor (Friedmann, 1983). It is also suggested that, in order to determine the gains in this strategy, further studies need to be conducted.

**Note:** This paper was presented at the 1<sup>st</sup> IML International Conference on Language and Teaching held on 24-25 November 2017 at the University of Dhaka.

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Appendix A  
S.S.C. Board Exam Question (English Second Paper):

**1. Dhaka Board-2015**  
English (Compulsory) 2nd Paper  
According to the Syllabus of 2013

Sub Code **108**  
Total Marks: 100

Time : 3 hours

*N.B. Answer all the question. The figures in the right margin indicate full marks.*

**Part A : Grammar (60 marks)**

1. Fill in the blanks with the words from the box. You may need to change the forms of some of the words. You may need to use one word more than once.  $\frac{1}{2} \times 10 = 5$

to	a	for	in	work	prepare	the	by
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It is useful (a) — students to take part (b) — social service. (c) — taking part (d) — social service, they can benefit themselves as well as (e) — nation. Student life is (f) — period of (g) — for future life. If the students do some social (h) —, they will be better prepared for giving service (i) — the nation on completion of their education. As the students have so family burden and so they get enough time during the large vacation, they can do (j) — great deal of work for the people.

2. Fill in the blanks with suitable words.  $\frac{1}{2} \times 10 = 5$

Scientists have (a) — reported that the surface ice caps are (b) —. This is due to a rise (c) — atmospheric temperature known (d) — the greenhouse effect. According to the scientists, carbon dioxide is primarily responsible (e) — temperature rise in (f) —. The carbon dioxide is high (g) — coal and oil (h) — burn. The gas is accumulating in the atmosphere and (i) — temperature to rise. As a result, the polar ice in the North and South Poles (j) — melting.

3. Make five sentences using parts of sentences from each column of the table below.  $1 \times 5 = 5$

Education	is	the training for proper growth.
It	can prosper	the liberation of prejudice.
Nobody	embodies	our minds and refines our sensibility.
The purpose of education		in life without education
		the process by which our mind develops.

4. Complete the following text with right forms of the verbs given in the box.  $\frac{1}{2} \times 10 = 5$

take	work	come	dominate	keep
come	conduce	contribute	be	need

Today women are playing an important role in all spheres of life. Once they were (a) — by men. They are no longer (b) — within the four walls of their parents' or husbands' house. They have (c) — out of the kitchen and are (d) — hand in hand with men. By (e) — higher education, they are becoming pilots, doctors, engineers, teachers, administrators etc. They have (f) — able to prove their worth. They (g) — much to the economy of the country. Now it (h) — to the realization of the men that true development of the country is never possible (i) — half of the population idle at home. So, it (j) — no telling that women are playing a great role in the socio-economic condition of our country.

5. Change the narrative style of the following text. 5

"Good morning, students," said the teacher. "How are you?" "We are fine, sir. What about you?" "I am fine too. Please, sit down. Have you prepared your lesson?" the teacher asked. "Sorry, sir, we have not prepared our lesson," they replied.

6. Change the sentences according to directions.  $1 \times 10 = 10$

- (a) Television is one of the most wonderful inventions of modern science. (Make positive degree)  
(b) It was not invented overnight. (Make active voice)  
(c) Scientists spent many years and worked hard to invent television. (Make complex sentence)  
(d) Nowadays, almost every family has a television set. (Make negative sentence)  
(e) People of all ages like to watch television. (Make interrogative sentence)  
(f) The programmes telecast by television are very interesting. (Make complex sentence)  
(g) Television should telecast educative programmes. (Make passive voice)  
(h) If you watch television, you can learn many things. (Make simple sentence)  
(i) People spend their free time by watching television. (Make compound sentence)  
(j) Very few things are so useful as television. (Make superlative degree)

7. Complete the sentences.  $1 \times 5 = 5$

- (a) Many people cut trees —  
(b) Trees cause rainfall which —  
(c) If we cut trees at random —  
(d) Trees supply oxygen —  
(e) Since trees help us in many ways —

8. Complete the text adding suffixes, prefixes or the both with the root words given in the parenthesis.  $\frac{1}{2} \times 10 = 5$

The books of famous (a) — (write) — are put on sale in the book fair. Most of the (b) — (visit) — buy books of different (c) — (publish) —. Almost no visitor returns from the fair without making any purchase. The (d) — (buy) — like to buy at a fair price. Our book fair is always (e) — (crowd) —. As (f) — (vary) — books are (g) — (play) — in a fair, the buyers get a scope to choose books. They buy their (h) — (choose) — books after a long search. This facility is (i) — (available) — in any place other than a book fair. A book fair is always (j) — (come) — to the students.

9. Make tag questions of these statements.  $1 \times 5 = 5$

- (a) Most of the students who fail in English don't have strong foundation over grammar. —?  
(b) They read only to pass the examination. —?  
(c) Teachers should motivate them to learn the basic thing. —?  
(d) They can't help learning grammar. —?  
(e) Moreover, practice is essential too. —?

## Appendix B

Sample to be used by the students with masked identity:

