Teaching EFL Writing: A Comparative Study of Bengali and English Medium Secondary Schools in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Writing in English has become a challenging task for EFL learners in Bangladesh with the written test-based assessment system and growing importance of speaking skills as part of globalization. So the need for writing skill development remains the same despite the difference in curriculum and mode of communication (native or non-native language) of educational institutions. This study discovered the similarities and differences in the teaching methods of English writing at the secondary level of English medium and Bengali medium schools in Bangladesh. Students and teachers of twelve schools in Dhaka participated in the survey. Data was collected using a questionnaire, interviews, and focus group discussions. Findings show how most of the teachers and students in every medium focused on accuracy of structure and content development rather than the process of writing. Finally, this study suggests some common teaching strategies for improving the writing skills of EFL learners, irrespective of mediums.

Keywords: Writing Skill, Bengali Medium, English Medium, Teaching Strategies, Specific Feedback

Introduction

Krashen's (1982) acquisition-learning hypothesis brings out two ways of developing aptitude in a second language: either a conscious process of learning about the structure of the language in a formal environment or acquiring it by communicating in the second language, replicating the first language acquisition process. This hypothesis is reflected in the education system of Bangladesh where English medium schools ensure natural acquisition process and Bengali medium schools resemble the conscious learning theory.

While Bengali medium schools provide native language instruction and CLT (Communicative Language Teaching) based on the national curriculum, English medium schools follow the UK curriculum and offer an English speaking environment (Parvin & Haider, 2012). Most people in Bangladesh believe that proficiency in English improves with English medium based education (Hasan, 2004). In reality, though, maximum exposure to L2 (English) may ensure proficiency in vocabulary and thought process but blurs the difference between spoken and written discourse. On the other hand, the curriculum in Bengali medium schools use writing for developing content and structure rather than fulfilling the communicative purpose. In both cases, writing skill development is underappreciated despite the fact that Bangladesh has a written test based evaluation system. This problem is not visible in primary level classes where the teacher acts solely to instill the basics of L2 and students merely receive instructions. At the secondary level, learning becomes a group performance where both students and educators contribute, share, adopt, and adapt ideas. Writing becomes a complex process, merging acquisition and communication needs. Contemporaryprocedures require teaching writing for improving content, grammar, and vocabulary, rather than writing for writing's sake. Naturally then, learners cannot produce a proper

piece of writing in English even after learning the language as a compulsory subject for 7-8 years. This study identifies the similarities and dissimilarities between the existing methods used in both mediums for improving the writing skill of secondary level EFL (English as a foreign language) learners. It aims to find the common methods for teachers to ensure a standard performance, irrespective of the medium of instruction or curriculum. These developments can bring significant changes in the writing pedagogy of Bangladesh.

This study answers the following research questions:

1) What types of methods are used by English medium EFL teachers in class 8 for teaching writing?
2) What types of methods are used by Bengali medium EFL teachers in class 8 for teaching writing?
3) What are the similarities and differences between the teaching strategies used by Bengali medium and English medium EFL teachers to improve writing skills at the secondary level?

Literature review

To describe its importance, Byrne (1982) presented writing skills as a learner friendly tool for language proficiency. According to him, shy L2 speakers learn the language easily through writing. Being exposed to both L2 speaking and writing also speeds up the learning process. Besides, written scripts are a significant proof of improvement and formal or informal assessment.

At the primary and secondary level, written examination has always been the sole tool for formal evaluation in Bangladesh (Khan and Akter, 2011). However, Saha's study (2017) described the negative impact of exam-oriented approach on writing skill development in both Bengali and English medium schools which affects tertiary level performance. According to him, neither Bengali nor English medium schools inspire learners to focus on writing for writing's sake. Teachers make students practice writing for the public examinations, not for nourishing creativity. Al-Hammadi and Sidek (2015) considered lack of focus on writing skills at the secondary level to be responsible for the lack of success in writing at the university level. They suggested a theoretical framework for the secondary level EFL writing curriculum to determine its compatibility for the university. This framework mainly focused on teaching approach and design which included the role of learners and teachers. The review section of this paper intends to focus on these areas in detail to explore the existing EFL writing teaching strategies at the secondary level.

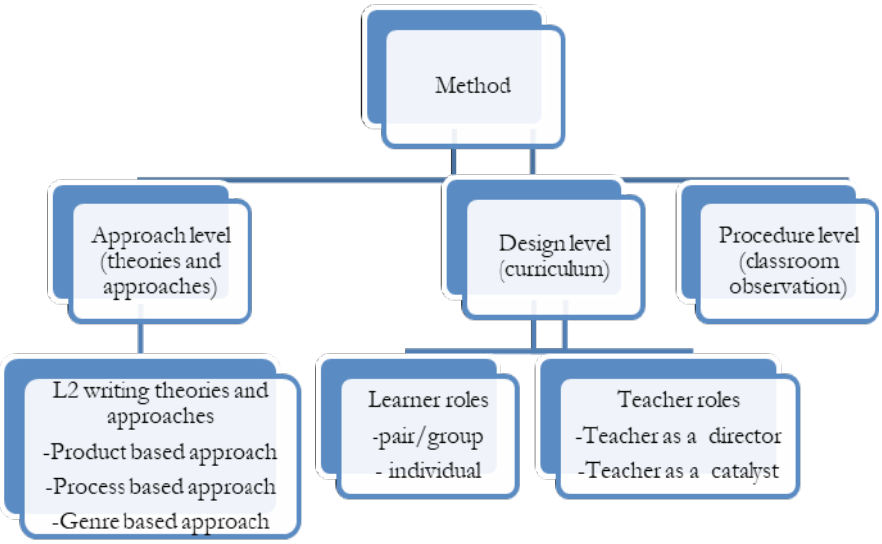

Figure 1: Theoretical framework (adopted from Hammadi and Sidek, 2015)

Approaches to teaching writing

In secondary EFL writing curriculum, the teaching approach plays a major role (Al-Hammadi & Sidek, 2015). To teach writing, three approaches are commonly used: product based, process based, and genre based (Eliwarti & Maarof, 2014).

Product-based approach

According to Steele (1992), product-based approach is where students analyze and highlight the features of a model text given by the teacher. Then they practice only the highlighted features. In the third stage, ideas are organized through guided writing. The last stage is the free writing stage where students choose from comparable writing tasks. Independent use of the newly learned skill, structure, and vocabulary is seen in the final production.

Process-based approach

Harmer (2006) says that, despite different factors like topic, genre, and medium, every piece of writing goes through four stages. Keeping the purpose, audience, content structure, and suitable discourse in mind, writers plan before writing. Then they create the initial draft. In the third stage, they review the draft and make necessary changes regarding idea organization, sentence structure, clarity, etc. After going through peer reviews and required modifications, a standard, error-free "final version" is produced. Harmer (2006) called process approach a recursive process as writers keep going back and forth to plan, draft, and edit repeatedly.

Genre-based approach

According to Firkins, Forey, and Sengupta (2007), genre-based approach involves modeling, joint construction, and independent construction of a text. At first, the teacher provides a model text in a specific genre keeping learners' needs in mind. Learners study and practice the communicative purpose, structure, and vocabulary of the particular genre. Then they reorganize the text by

bringing necessary changes in terms of sentence structure, word order, etc. Finally they produce a new text individually based on the taught genre. The instructor ensures that the final production is in sync with the target genre, vocabulary, and structure.

Role of learners

Learner participation plays a vital role in the EFL writing class (Al-Hammadi & Sidek, 2015). Unfortunately, EFL learners struggle with maintaining an even distribution of content, organizing ideas, focusing on reader, goal, choice of words, and possible errors at word and sentence level (Rass, 2015). In Ciamis (2016), school students were demotivated due to their lack of grammatical knowledge and vocabulary (cited in Friatin, 2018, p. 58). Afrin (2016) revealed a common practice of memorization among Bengali medium learners. So, individual focus on writing skill development became a secondary concern for the rest of their academic life. Recent studies of Bangladesh exhibit basic errors of EFL students at both structural and organizational levels like spelling, grammatical structure of subject-verb, preposition, use of punctuation, etc (Karim, Maasum & Latif, 2017; Afrin, 2016; Mustaque, 2014; Fahmida, 2010).

Collaborative writing

Although writing does not involve as many interactive activities as speaking, researchers find many advantages of collaborative writing (Fernández Dobao & Blum, 2013; Fernández Dobao, 2012; Shehadeh, 2011; Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007; Storch, 2005; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Research showed that Bangladeshi teachers commonly tend to set up individual tasks for learners. Group/pair work is common for less than 30% teachers of both mediums. 70% Bengali medium teachers depend on the learner's memorization skill and 75% English medium teachers depend on fixed content of text book for learning (Milon, Alam, & Hossain, 2018).

Teacher as a dictator

Teachers' role in EFL writing is further analyzed by Chaisiri (2010). His study of Thai EFL learners demonstrates the prevalence of teacher-oriented classrooms despite the successful implementation of a four staged activity which involves triggering schema, analysis of sample script, guided writing with instructor's support, and independent writing practice. Abas and Bakir (2013) examined the negative impact of Palestinian teachers' traditional teaching methods which result in nearly inactive learners and repetitive tasks in the class.

Teacher as a catalyst

In case of L2 proficiency, while speaking skill needs nature (exposure to foreign language), writing skill needs nurture from EFL instructors (Brown, 2001). Harmer (2006) proposed some before-, while- and after-writing tasks for teachers, such as:

> **Demonstrate** – Create awareness about genre and functional language before writing.
> **Motivate and provoke** – Encourage learners through different activities to generate ideas and appropriate vocabulary.
> **Support** – Give advice and constructive suggestions during student writing.
> **Respond** – Check the content and structure of their draft and give suggestions, not corrections.

Evaluate – Highlight strengths and weaknesses of final scripts and acquire learner response regarding this evaluation.

Focus on context

Before writing, teachers should encourage learners to focus on the context of the text (Bruner, 1985; Graves, 1981; Flower & Hayes, 1977). Sun (2014) conducted an empirical study of 16 weeks which shows the positive effect of schemata on college students' essay writing. Afrin's (2016) study showed that more than 60% learners are not familiar with the prewriting technique in Bangladesh.

Connect reading and writing

Both readers and writers have adequate knowledge of written language, schemata for interpretation and analysis of the text, and process and evaluation of information in the same way (Kucer, cited in Xiao, 2008). Cho and Brutt-Griffler (2015) showed the positive impact of combining reading and writing on middle school Korean learners' writing skill. In his year-long study of Iraninan EFL learners, Mermelstein (2015) showed that extensive reading has sustainable impact on writing performance.

Provide feedback

Srichanyachon (2011) demonstrated the negative impact of identifying form and structure-related mistakes rather than investigating the use of proper context and language in writing. His study showed Thai teachers' habit of assessing only surface level errors in learners' writing. In Pizarro's (2017) study, a vital role of feedback provider and medium is presented. Students highly valued instructor's comments and asked for clarification if necessary. Peer feedback was not appreciated due to their lack of proficiency in English. Learners mostly preferred oral feedback despite having detailed written feedback.

The previous studies bring forth a number of effective teaching methods of EFL writing. For the secondary level learners of Bangladesh, how many of these methods are available? Is there a difference in the method based on medium? Based on these questions, this paper conducts a comparative study of the present methodology of teaching EFL writing at the secondary level of Bengali and English medium schools.

Research methodology

Sampling

Data was collected by adapting the procedure used by Milon *et al.* (2018). From 12 schools (6 Bengali medium and 6 English medium), 30 teachers and 60 students of Class 8 were selected. From each medium, 15 teachers answered the questionnaire. Sampling for focus group discussion and interviews was done according to Katsara's (2008) procedure. From every school, 5 students participated in 12 focus group discussions.

Data collection tools

Following the questionnaires of Mohite (2014), Khanalizadeh and Allami (2012), and Petrić and Czárl (2003), a 28-item questionnaire for teachers was prepared and categorized as attitude, pre-writing, during writing, post-writing stages. It contained a four-point Likert-scale (Always, usually,

sometimes, never) questions to collect objective responses. By following the procedure of Ho (2006), focus group discussions were set up which gathered subjective responses from questions for understanding learner perception in the same categories as the questionnaire. Some of the participants were interviewed by applying a semi-structured design suggested by Nunan (1992). Collected data has been interpreted using pie charts to get an apparent distribution and comparison of the responses of each question. Furthermore, key points from the focus group discussions have been analyzed.

Findings

Findings from quantitative data

1. Do you ask students to make a list of their ideas before writing on a given topic?

Figure 2: Use of brainstorming technique

This question was asked to find out whether teachers allow learners to plan for ideas before writing. English medium teachers were more inclined towards this technique. Figure 2 shows that 60% of English medium teachers always keep a planning stage in the writing class. On the other hand, more than 50% Bengali medium teachers sometimes include planning stage before writing.

2. Do you tell students about who they are writing for?

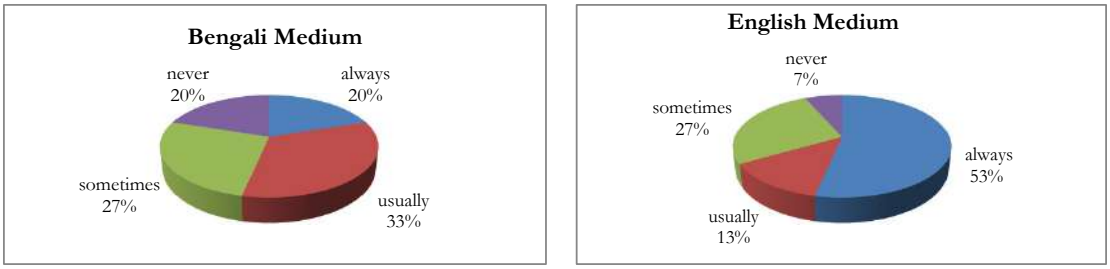

Figure 3: Use of context

This question elicited information about the teacher's attitude towards creating awareness about context before writing. English medium teachers are more conscious about this process than

Bengali medium teachers. A comparison between the two charts in Figure 3 shows that more than 50% English medium teachers focused on audience of the text in the planning stage. However, only 33% Bengali medium teachers usually informed learners about the intended audience.

3. Do you allow your students to have a group discussion in writing class?

Figure 4: Use of group work/pair work

This question measured the ratio of peer work in the EFL writing class. The results show that group work is rare for both English medium and Bengali medium classes. Figure 4 shows that less than 30% teachers from both mediums always employ group work in writing. Around 50% teachers in both mediums sometimes use this technique.

4. Do you provide samples of the writing task?

Figure 5: Use of model text

This question ascertained whether model texts played a major role in EFL writing class. Data from Figure 5 shows more than half of the teachers from both mediums use plenty of model texts in the classroom. 60% English medium teachers and 53% Bengali medium teachers always use model texts to teach writing. In fact, English medium writing classes are never taken without a model text (see Figure 5).

5. Do you ask students to check their own writing?

Figure 6: Use of revising/editing technique

This question aimed to identify the frequency of reviewing and editing of the written script in the classroom. Figure 6 shows that this technique is sometimes used in the classroom of both mediums. Less than 30% Bengali medium teachers always instruct learners to revise and edit based on feedback while less than 20% English medium teachers always use this technique in the post-writing stage.

6. Do you give general comments (like good/bad, etc.)?

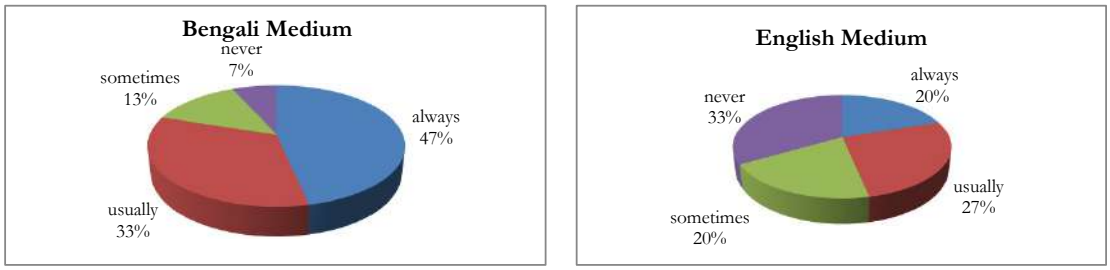

Figure 7: Use of general comments

This question aimed to identify the frequency of general comments given by the teachers. According to Figure 7, general comments are more common for Bengali medium students. Almost 50% Bengali medium teachers always provide general comments as feedback where they identify basic errors. On the other hand, 20% English medium teachers always give general comments. Only 7% Bengali medium teachers never give this type of feedback.

7. Do you think giving lectures about how to write is more beneficial than giving a writing task in the class?

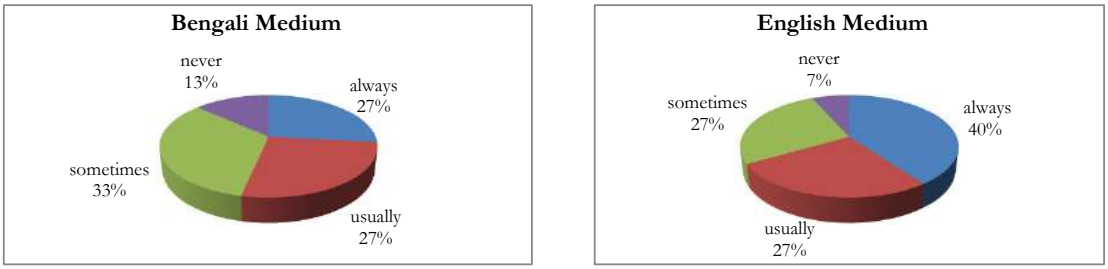

Figure 8: Use of teacher talk

This question was asked to measure how teacher-oriented the classroom was at the secondary level. Figure 8 shows that English medium teachers are more inclined towards giving detailed explanations before writing practice in the classroom. 40% English medium teachers and 27% Bengali medium teachers always give lectures before writing.

8. Do you believe that accuracy in grammar and correct spelling makes students good writers?

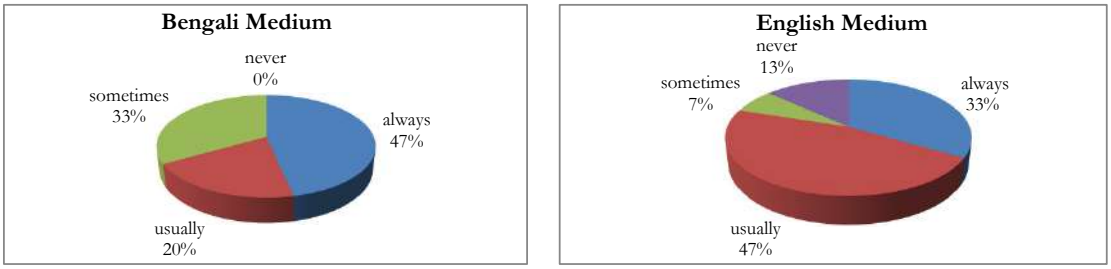

Figure 9: Importance of grammatical accuracy

The purpose of this question was to identify the teacher's view about the importance of grammar and correct vocabulary in L2 writing. Bengali medium teachers gave more importance to accuracy in writing than English medium teachers. According to Figure 9, almost 50% Bengali medium teachers believe that a grammatically accurate writer is a good writer. On the other hand, less than 40% English medium teachers always give importance to grammar for good writing.

Findings and analysis of qualitative data

As part of the data triangulation process (Cohen & Manion, 1994), 60 secondary level students in small groups of 5 participated in 12 focus group discussions following Katsara's (2008) method. Some of the students also joined in semi-structured interviews. According to the subjective data, different issues were identified, such as role of the teacher, role of materials, challenges faced by learners.

Learners from both mediums preferred writing to speaking. They described how speaking brings the immediate pressure of thinking, talking, and being judged by classmates and teacher simultaneously. On the other hand, the writing process gives them time to organize, present, correct, and review their ideas multiple times before the final presentation. Some of the learners also believe that writing makes them more creative.

Use of material: Learners from both mediums reported that they go through common and repetitive topics for writing throughout the lessons. 10 out of 30 students in English medium schools criticized the lack of variety in topics. Most learners from both mediums appreciated common topics as the context remains familiar and the task requires less preparation. One participant from English medium explained:

> We do not need the teacher's help to write about Facebook or the movie *Cast Away*. With common topics like these, we can write without any help or preparation.

Both English medium and Bengali medium students talked about the frequent use of model texts provided by the teacher. They mostly used the model text either to memorize (Bengali medium) or copy ideas and vocabulary (English Medium).

Role of the teacher: Learners reported the prevalence of lecture-based classrooms where the teacher introduced a new topic or corrected errors through detailed description. For most of the English medium learners, too much teacher talk resulted in lack of preparation time and unfinished tasks. On the other hand, Bengali medium learners said that they struggled with vocabulary and idea generation. So they preferred the lecture mode as it gives them ideas for new topics and necessary vocabulary.

Challenges faced by learners

Role of peers: Learners from both mediums displayed a negative attitude towards collaboration with peers. They believed that working alone would ensure more freedom and better performance. While sharing ideas with peers seemed plausible for some learners, most of them expressed their fear about the possibility of receiving negative and less productive comments from classmates.

Lack of preparation: Students from both mediums showed a common tendency to start the task without proper preparation. Bengali medium students did not know about the brainstorming technique for listing ideas before writing. One of the students said:

> During writing, I keep listening to the comments of the teacher and other students. This is how I collect ideas.

English medium students frequently used a mind map and gathered ideas through brainstorming in the writing classroom. However, they considered the process difficult, time consuming, and responsible for unfinished tasks. One participant from English medium stated:

> The thinking and organizing idea stage seems harder than the main writing task. It takes a lot of time to come up with ideas. That is why I immediately start writing and use any idea that comes to my mind at that moment.

Lack of revision: Secondary level students expressed more enthusiasm about finishing the task rather than evaluating it. Revising and editing was more common among Bengali medium learners than English medium learners. 20 participants from Bengali medium believed that they revised better when they got immediate response from the teacher after writing. Oral feedback from the teacher always prompted instant correction and editing. One student from Bengali medium said:

> When the teacher gives oral feedback to someone in the class, everyone else can hear it and correct their writing immediately. It helps more than the written comments from the teacher which we get in the next class.

On the contrary, out of 30 English medium students, 15 participants reported how they skipped revision and editing most of the time. As written feedback is a common practice in their schools, detailed editing is possible when the teacher checks and returns learners' scripts. They preferred written feedback as it did not expose their errors in front of peers and also stayed on record for future reference. However, late feedback bore the risk of learners forgetting about the task and not checking teachers' comments.

Role of feedback: Learners from both mediums considered teacher feedback incomplete and confusing in some cases. According to students, Bengali medium teachers give comments like, "vocabulary needs to be increased," "read more," "learn grammatical rules," etc. English medium teachers gave comments like: "writing needs proper organization of ideas," "revise and try to find why the sentence does not make complete sense," "repetition," etc.

Discussion

The uniqueness of this study lies in the fact that prior studies have only noted the teachers' attitudes and techniques for EFL writing in primary, secondary, and tertiary levels, without any medium and curriculum based comparison. An initial objective of this research was to identify the strategies of the EFL teachers in both mediums. Results show that English medium teachers mainly focus on content development but Bengali medium teachers focus primarily on grammatical and lexical accuracy. At the secondary level, English medium and Bengali medium teachers have different perceptions towards writing. Still, they follow similar strategies when it comes to using sample texts, preparation in the pre-writing stage, and editing.

According to the study, the process approach is almost absent in the classroom. For example: brainstorming before writing is practiced sometimes. However, repetitive topics, familiar contexts, and model texts increase copying, rote learning, and reduce focus on the structure and discourse of particular genres as well as any need of planning. This outcome is similar to Afrin's (2016) study who found memorization skills practiced in Bengali medium schools.

One interesting finding is the negative effect of content without variety which makes learners lose interest in idea generation and development. This is contrary to prior studies of Rass (2015) and Ciamis (2016) where lack of proficiency has been identified as the primary cause of demotivation.

The most alarming finding is that the classes focus more on theory consumption than actual writing practice. This result is consistent with the observation of Milon *et al.* (2018). English medium

teachers, especially, focused on clarifying the topic of books. Struggles at the preparation stage is common for Bengali medium learners. On the other hand, reflection and review is not common among English medium learners. This study further corroborates Chasiri's (2010) observation that even a properly staged EFL writing classroom is still extremely teacher-centered.

The findings about collaborative writing are similar to the study of Milon *et al.* (2018). Group work is not welcomed by most teachers and learners although it is used sometimes. Learner reluctance stems from the fear of negative peer evaluation rather than their lack of competence. This result is contrary to Pizarro's (2017) findings where peers were deemed incompetent for feedback giving.

It can be fairly deduced that writing is still an individual task in EFL classrooms which is time consuming with a tedious editing process. English medium learners may plan better than Bengali medium learners but both medium classes struggle with the writing process. After writing, learners may revise from time to time but editing is only done after receiving the teacher's feedback. The study displays the pattern of commonly used written feedback at the secondary level EFL class. This feedback comprises vague and general comments on linguistic accuracy mostly and shut down any further improvement of ideas. This finding is supported by Srichanyachon's (2011) study which showed instructors' tendency to correct only surface errors of learners' writing.

The findings of this study contain data from only Dhaka-based schools so it cannot identify all the existing teaching methods and possible factors affecting the teachers, learners, and classrooms of Bangladesh. However, a common picture of the existing situation in EFL writing classroom is portrayed, regardless of medium and curriculum. The findings show a classroom with strategies solely focused on content development, not any specific writing approach. A major finding was the vague feedback learners get for their task in writing which is used for further reference. More studies can be done to find the appropriate language and process of feedback. This study also opens up the scope for further research into material development, assessment policy, collaborative writing approach, and task management in secondary level EFL writing pedagogy.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study set out to gain a better understanding of the teaching methods used in the EFL classrooms of Bangladesh at the secondary level. The findings clearly indicate that both mediums in Bangladesh use similar methods for teaching writing in the EFL class despite the difference in curriculum and language of instruction. Writing is merely an aid for organizing points and applying correct grammar and vocabulary rather than a separate skill worth developing. The process approach only resides in some of the teachers' conceptions, not in practice. It is high time to fill the gap between what the learner needs and what the teacher does in the EFL writing classroom. The only way to do this is to establish effective teaching methods for writing. Based on these findings, the following suggestions are provided:

- Variety in content should be ensured to keep learners engaged in the classroom;
- A combination of product and process approach should be applied to keep the focus on writing skills development, not only content and accuracy improvement;
- Learner-centred classroom should be in practice;

- Instead of general comments, clear and concise feedback should be given about specific parts of the written task;
- Peer involvement should be visible in the pre-writing and post-writing stage.

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