

6 | English Language Assessment in Bangladesh: Developments and Challenges

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment is a serious and sensitive issue because lives are affected either positively or negatively through its outcomes. These outcomes have far reaching consequences, and have an impact not only on test takers but teachers, society and the whole education milieu. Therefore, assessment needs to be carried out judiciously because it helps to identify what is working and what needs attention. It also needs to be informative and fair because the benefits of sound assessment practices can change lives. In the arena of education, assessment may broadly be described as an ongoing and continuous effort to improve the quality of teaching, learning, testing and curriculum design.

This paper aims to provide an overview of the English language assessment at the secondary and higher secondary level in Bangladesh. It particularly focuses on the two major English public tests – the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) examinations. The paper is presented in four parts. The first part provides the background and outlines the secondary education system in Bangladesh. Some major developments in secondary education are also highlighted. In the second part the content, format and assessment criteria of the two English tests and the washback effect of these tests are also discussed. The third part reviews some of the pertinent issues related to testing and assessment. The fourth part describes a small study that investigates the perspectives of teacher cum examiners regarding their views on the various aspects of the tests and their suggestions for improving the tests.

BACKGROUND AND EDUCATION SYSTEM

Bangladesh follows a British model of education and till the late 1980s traditional models and methods of teaching and assessing English language were used. It has a three tier system: 1) the primary, the 2) secondary and the 3) tertiary level.

The secondary level comprises the junior secondary (6-8), secondary (9-10) and higher secondary (11-12). At the end of the secondary level, students sit for the secondary school certificate exam (SSC). This is a very important school leaving exam. This is the first public exam which students face after completing 10 years of study. Successful completion of this exam enables students to move on to the next phase – higher secondary level (class XI and XII). The higher secondary level lasts for two years and at the end of this two-year period students sit for the Higher Secondary Certificate exam (HSC). Both these examinations are conducted and controlled by the seven education boards located in Dhaka, Chittagong, Comilla, Jessore, Rajshahi, Barisal and Sylhet.

The English Curriculum and Text books are provided by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB). The textbooks titled ‘English For Today’ are a series which run from grade 1-12. English is a compulsory subject on the curriculum.

Some major developments took place in the 1990s to improve English language teaching and learning at the SSC and HSC level.

The orientation of secondary school teachers for training English in Bangladesh (OSTEBB) project started in 1990 (1990-1994) with the aim of revising and updating the secondary level English curriculum. This was a joint project of the Government of Bangladesh and the Department for International Development (DFID).

Another project of the Ministry of Education and DFID – the English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP) in 1997 took major steps to initiate changes in curriculum, textbooks, teaching methodology and the examination system. The project aimed at improving the communicative competence of the HSC and SSC learners and communicative curricula, textbooks and teachers; guides were developed. In addition teacher training and examination reform was a major focus of this project. The project continued from 1998 -2002.

The Secondary Education Sector Improvement Project (SESIP)

started in 2002 and aimed to improve the quality of teaching. Another initiative titled Teaching quality improvement project (TQI) was committed to capacity building in secondary education. There was a strong emphasis on English and teacher training courses in English were conducted in almost all the districts of Bangladesh.

Another recent project (July 2008) under the Directorate of Secondary Education – the Secondary Education Quality and Access Enhancement Project (SEQAEP) is a donor financed project which will be implemented in 121 upazillas (sub-districts of Bangladesh). The focus of this project is on English because school examinations and SSC results have indicated that English language is one of the weakest subject areas at the secondary level. It aims to develop the basic skills and concepts of the secondary level students. Teachers need to be trained to make their classes more effective. Therefore, the main objective of this project is to provide support to English teachers by enhancing their skills and training them up for better performance. The project seeks to do this with the help of master and core trainers who will work directly with teachers in the field.

THE TARGET TESTS: SSC AND HSC

Both the SSC and HSC tests are administered country wide through five major regional education boards. In this section, I describe the nature and format of the two public tests. Both SSC and HSC are high stakes tests. SSC and HSC test results are crucial for students because success in these exams is a pre-requisite for admission into tertiary level institutions. Especially the prestigious public universities (e.g., Dhaka University, Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology) require students to have high grade point average (GPA) in both their SSC and HSC exam results. The university entrance exam requires a total of 200 marks and the breakdown of marks for the university admission test, percentage of SSC and HSC test marks is as follows:

University written admission test:	120 marks
SSC:	30 marks (15%)
HSC:	50 marks (25%)

Total: 200 marks

It can be seen that 40% of the admission test marks are dependent on SSC and HSC test results. This further highlights the importance of these tests.

SSC Syllabus and Test Format

As mentioned earlier the SSC is a school leaving achievement test. Students aged 14-16 sit for this test. The English language syllabus aims to focus on the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing as learner-centered activities within communicative contexts. It is expected that students should achieve an elementary level to intermediate command of the four language skills at the secondary level.

In the introduction to the syllabus document, NTCB specifies the objective of the syllabus as follows:

English needs to be recognised as an essential work oriented skill that is needed if the employment, development and educational needs of the country are to be met successfully. Increased communicative competence in English, therefore constitutes a vital skill for learners at this stage (NCTB, p.136).

The syllabus document identifies 'reading' and 'writing' as the two vital skills needed by the students who will progress through secondary to higher secondary level. It recognises 'listening' and 'speaking' skills as 'two necessary fundamental skills' which are to be achieved for both effective learning and for use.

The SSC and HSC English test consist of two English Papers – Paper I and Paper II. Each paper is of three hours duration and carries 100 marks. Paper I of SSC English test comprises seen comprehension, vocabulary and guided writing. Paper II consists of grammar and composition.

The HSC I paper includes seen comprehension, vocabulary, and guided writing. Paper two contains unseen comprehension, grammar and writing (see Appendix 3 for detailed test format and mark distribution).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Any discussion on language testing and assessment needs to incorporate some fundamental concepts and issues and developments in the field. This section will provide a brief overview of the major types of test, concept of wash back and impact, testing principles and the importance of test specifications. In addition a brief history of language testing with a focus on communicative language tests will also be highlighted.

Test Types, Washback and Impact

In the academic arena, a test is a tool for measuring a student's knowledge or ability. It is a yard stick which is regarded as an indicator of a learner's success or failure. It is important to be aware of the different types of test as these will depend on the objective of the course. Davies and Allen (1977) and Hughes (1989) talk about four major types of tests – proficiency, achievement, diagnostic and placement tests. Proficiency tests do not hinge on any syllabus; they purport to test the ability of the students – what they have learnt overtime. Proficiency tests are used to gauge how suitable candidates will be for performing a certain task or following a specific course (Heaton, 1990). Achievement tests are essential to measure the learning which is taking place. They help to indicate progress and attainment of objectives specified earlier. An achievement test is usually a formal examination given at the end of a school year. It measures a student's mastery of what should have been taught and is concerned with covering the contents of a syllabus (Heaton, 1990). A diagnostic test helps to diagnose the strengths and weaknesses of the students and accordingly highlights area for remedial attention. A placement test enables teachers to place students in groups according to their language ability before embarking upon a course. It is

important to draw test specifications for the different types of tests so that all stake holders know what is expected from the test.

A distinction is made between criterion referenced tests and norm referenced tests. Criterion referenced tests help to find out whether a student can perform a particular task or not. Norm referenced tests show how a student's performance is compared with other students in the group. They help to identify whether a student is in the top or bottom part of a group. This brings to another important concept of testing i.e., wash back. Washback is a technical word in testing which describes the influence or effect of testing on teaching and learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Gates, 1995; Hughes, 1989). It has also been defined as "the connections between testing and learning" (Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman (1996, p. 29). Teachers usually have a tendency to teach to the examination so that their students can pass. If it is a good test the result is beneficial wash back. If the test is bad the result is harmful backwash. "Public examination bodies are usually all too aware of the influence of their tests on teaching" (Heaton, 1990, p. 17). So wash back effects can have both a positive or negative effect on stakeholders. It has been argued by Brown (2005, p. 8) that negative backwash can cause students to learn special "examination-ese" language practice items similar to the ones on the test; learn test taking strategies; or study vocabulary and grammar and ignore other important components of the language. Positive washback can be achieved if some of the following points are taken into consideration: if the test reflects the syllabus, is based on course objectives, is criterion referenced and rests on sound theoretical principles focuses and on those abilities which we want to develop in our students (Brown, 1997). It is important to mention that a distinction is often made between washback and impact. As stated earlier washback is concerned about the influence of testing on teaching and learning and this includes teachers, curriculum and materials, while "impact deals with the wider influence of tests, their consequences beyond the classroom" (Hamp Lyons, 2000, p. 586). Bachman and Palmer (1996) point out that impact operates at two levels - "micro level, in terms of the individuals who are affected by the particular test use and a macro-level in terms of the educational system or society" (pp. 29-30).

Key Testing Principles and Test Specifications

Testing is about making inferences and one of the main functions of test is to measure (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; McNamara, 2000). We will begin by highlighting the three essential qualities of test that are integral to proper measurement. Reliability refers to the consistency of test scores and it imperative to have relatively consistent test scores because erratic scores cannot provide us accurate information about the ability we want to measure. It may not be possible to weed out inconsistencies completely- however through test design efforts may be made to minimise the sources of inconsistencies that our under our control (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

A test is considered valid if it measures what it is supposed to measure. Four main types of validity which test designers and teachers should be aware of are content, construct, criterion and face validity. Practicality is related to issues such as test administration, feasibility concerns and costs.

Drawing test specifications is an integral part of the test construction process. They are the recipe or blue print which is crucial for any kind of test design (Bachman, 1990; McNamara, 2000). In particular, test specifications need to be given a major consideration in large scale assessments, since the tests need to be reliable, valid and practical. All those involved with the testing process should be guided by test specifications as they serve as a blue print for test developers and item writers. Important factors such as the defining of the test construct and its scoring procedures form part and parcel of test specifications (Rashid & Galea, 2005). Drawing a well constructed test specification will ensure that a test is not only well constructed but also make it transparent valid and reliable. Teachers and test designers need to learn to design test specifications for a test because it will help them to spell out the test tasks based on test objectives and learning outcomes.

Teachers need guidance for test construction and need to be clear about the content, structure, format, scoring procedures among other things of the test. Bachman (1990) gives a comprehensive check list of points for drawing test specifications. The following need to be stated clearly:

- 1) Purpose of the test
- 2) Type of learners
- 3) Target Language Situation
- 4) Section/papers & length of test
- 5) Language Skills
- 6) Language Elements
- 7) Tasks (discrete point or integrative)
- 8) Items for each section
- 9) Rubrics
- 10) Criteria for assessment

History of Language Testing

The history of language testing has been presented in three phases (Spolsky, 1978). The first phase or period has been described as the pre-scientific era when language testing was not informed by any research and the principles of reliability and objectivity were not adhered to. This was prior to the 1950s when Grammar translation method and subjective tests were the main method of teaching and assessment. This was followed by the psychometric-structuralist era where the approach towards testing was atomistic and discrete point items were preferred. Dissatisfaction with discrete point analysis which disintegrated the elements of the language and were inadequate indicators of language proficiency led to the emergence of the integrative approach to testing. The third phase labelled as the psycholinguistic-sociolinguistic era ushered in the period of global tests. An off shoot of this epoch was the age of communicative testing. Before discussing communicative language testing I would like to gloss the term 'communicative competence'.

The idea of communicative language teaching emerged in the 1970s. It had its roots in Hymes (1970) theory of communicative competence. Hymes believed that asocial linguistics is not worth while and proposed the idea of communicative competence. He believes that in order to develop communicative competence in learners it is not enough to know only the rules of the language only but learners should be able to use language in context depending on social demands. In the following two decades after 1970 the term communicative competence has been

expanded and interpreted in different ways. Canale and Swain (1981) identify four components of communicative competence namely grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, strategic competence discourse competence. Kiato (1996) notes that the basic idea of communicative competence remains the ability to use language appropriately, both receptively and productively in different situations.

The basic purpose of communicative language tests is to measure how students use language in real life situations. Davies et al. (1999) define communicative language tests as follows:

Communicative tests are tests of communicative skills, typically used in contradistinction to tests of grammatical knowledge. Such tests often claim to operationalise theories of communicative competence, although the form they take will depend on which dimension they choose to emphasise, be it specific to context, authenticity of materials or the simulation of real life performance. (p. 26)

Some core features of communicative tests as identified by Harrison (1983, pp. 77-78) propose that these tests should:

- 1) assess language used for a purpose beyond itself
- 2) depend on the bridging of an information gap
- 3) represent an encounter.

However, there have been criticisms about setting up tests that can really measure communicative competence in real contexts. Morrow (1991) states "... communicating meanings is very elusive criterion in deed on which to base judgments" (p. 112).

Several attempts have been made to develop a model for communicative competence and valid tests of its competence (Haider, 2003). Bachman and Palmer (1984) attempting to interpret Canale and Swain's communicative approach identify three factors, i.e., trait, modal and method factors which need to be considered when designing a performance test. Skehan (1991) regarded these as of "being of pivotal importance in influencing the language testing theories and practice's throughout the 1990s" (p. 9).

THE STUDY

Aim

The aim of this small scale study was to explore the views of the teachers and examiners regarding the current status of assessment at the secondary and higher secondary level. The purpose was to evaluate the existing SSC and HSC tests and identify possible areas for improvement. It was hoped that the views of the teachers cum examiners would provide information which could prove useful for teachers, test designers, administrators and policy makers. This research explored perspectives and did not make generalizations. Data was mainly collected through structured and focus group interviews. The research is qualitative in nature and the approach adopted is interpretative.

Participants

The respondents were teachers of English teaching at the secondary and higher secondary level. A total of 34 teachers (school, 14; college, 20) from prestigious schools in Dhaka city participated in the study.

SSC Teacher Profile

A total of 14 school teachers (11 male and 3 female) from leading semi government schools in Dhaka city took part in the study. Most of the teachers except for 1 had extensive years of teaching experience. Three teachers had more than 20 years of experience, 7 had above 10 years and 3 above 5 years. Only one teacher had experience below 5 years. Two teachers were Head examiners and had experience of both setting and marking papers for more than 20 years. Out of the 5 examiners two had marking experience over 10 years and 3 less than 2 years (See Appendix 2).

HSC Teacher Profile

A total of 20 teachers from 7 colleges were interviewed. Twelve (12) male and eight (8) female teachers took part in the interview. Seven teachers had above 20 years of teaching experience; one (1) had above 10 years; eight (8) below 10 years and four (4) below five years (See

Appendix 3).

Among these teachers seventeen (17) were examiners. One (1) was a senior examiner with more than 20 years of examining experience. Six (6) teachers had above 10 years and below 2 years and eight (8) teachers had experience below 5 years. Three (3) had no marking experience at all. Five teachers had the experience of setting questions for the HSC examination.

Focus of Interview Questions

Teachers were asked their views on aspects related to the SSC/HSC test. They were asked to comment on the following.

- Views on the term ‘communication’ ‘communicative competence’ and communicative items of the SSC/HSC test.
- Assessment of the four skills and grammar
- Marking criteria for assessing writing
- Grading
- Papers (1& 11) of the test
- Variety of test items
- Role of prediction
- Test preparation from student and teacher perspective
- Instructions for paper setters/markers & test specifications
- Number of scripts and examiner training
- Strengths of the SSC/HSC test
- Weaknesses of the SSC/HSC test
- Suggestions for improvement.

Before presenting the views gathered from teachers on the SSC examination a brief overview of teacher profile is presented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perspectives of Secondary School Teachers on the SSC Test

Focus group interviews and individual interviews with school

teachers revealed the following views. The responses are grouped according to the focus of the questions asked.

Views on the Terms 'Communicative,' 'Communicative Competence,' and Communicative Items on the Test

Majority of the teachers (10) were clear about the meaning of the term 'communicative'. They mentioned use of English in real life or practical situations and focus on the four skills. Some comments from teachers about these terms are given below:

- By communicative I understand developing the four skills of language simultaneously.
- It is connected with the ability to communicate in a foreign language, form correct utterances and use them appropriately in various circumstances.
- students should be able to use their knowledge of English in practical situations.
- the term communicative gives emphasis on communicative competence which means the ability to use language in various situations.

A good number of teachers (12) stated that the SSC test to some extent reflected the syllabus and was testing communicative competence of the learners to some extent. Two (2) teachers observed that the test was completely communicative. Four (4) teachers disagreed fully that the test was not measuring communicative competence and two claimed that:

- I think that the current SSC test is failing to test communicative competence because it is seen that students even after scoring good grades i.e. A, A+ (80+ marks) are not able to speak in English and interact with others in English in practical situations.
- No the current SSC tests are not testing communicative competence. Students are not fluent in English. They are getting high GPAs (GPA 5 and Golden GPA) but their communicative competence is not developed.

Others added that focus on only two skills of reading and writing made the test less communicative.

According to the teachers interviewed more than half said that story writing, dialogue writing, report writing and seen comprehension were regarded as communicative items. Two categorically stated that only report writing, story writing and dialogue writing are communicative test items. Others mentioned that story and dialogue writing “helps students to express their own ideas and students do not write these based on memorisation but spontaneously” and that is why they were communicative test items”.

Assessment of Four Skills

All the interviewees mentioned that only reading and writing were assessed on the test and listening and speaking were never tested. They mentioned that writing was assessed through objective and subjective questions. It consists of items like paragraphs, short compositions and letter/application, summary, dialogue and story writing. More than 80% teachers mentioned that marking criteria for assessing writing is mainly subjective. Most of the teachers stated that they mark writing on the basis of grammar, spelling and main ideas expressed in the text. One teacher said creativity is also rewarded. Some teachers (3) said that the highest marks they award in writing out of 10 are 6 or 7 and out of 5 are 3 or 4.

Teachers reported that reading skills were assessed through reading comprehension (both seen and unseen) questions which included cloze tests with and without clues and True/false items.

They stated grammar was assessed on aspects via exercises in transformation, articles, prepositions, right form of verbs, phrases and idioms, tag questions and sentence completion. They mentioned that 40 marks were reserved for grammar and added that for objective questions the mark allocation was very clear.

Variety of Test Items

Comments were elicited from the participants about the range and variety of test items on the test and majority (13) opined that there was adequate variety. One teacher stated that: “variety is there but to make it challenging new items should be introduced.”

Grading System

Majority of the teachers expressed reservation about the grading system. They were not happy with the wide range of marks awarded for A to A+ (80-100). They informed that the board encourages them to give high marks for composition (80-90%).

Opinions about Two Papers

13 out of 14 teachers said that two papers are required. However one teacher pointed out that additional 100 marks be allotted for listening and speaking.

Role of Prediction

Almost all the teachers (13) opined that 'prediction' plays a vital role. They stated that usually teachers predict a list of topics and students memorize paragraphs and compositions. One teacher commented 'the role of prediction should be minimized.'

Student Preparation

Teachers informed that in order to get students ready for their board's examination they take class tests and mock tests. They make them practice question papers in class. They added that they prepare students according to the contents of the syllabus. Most teachers (11) said preparation lies in memorising answers. They admitted they give students a list of compositions to memorize and practice the same.

Students on their own for test preparation cram essays, paragraphs and letters. They go for private tuitions and solve question papers of various schools and previous exams. They reported students bank a lot on suggestions from teachers and guidebooks.

Experience as a Paper Setter/Examiner

Out of 10 teachers three were paper setters and 4 examiners. Two were senior head examiners with 15 and 25 years of examiner experience. The examiners said they mark between 300-400 scripts on a regular basis.

Test Specifications

A good number of teachers (10) said they do not draw test

specifications. Three teachers said that they draw test specifications so that students can have clear idea about what will come in the examination.

Examiner Training

Majority (10) said there is no arrangement for training. A brief meeting is held before distributing the scripts. Some (4) of the teachers said that they are given a printed sheet with some set instructions and some guidelines provided for marking and evaluating the scripts.

A few (6) examiners stated that examiners are encouraged to give marks if a student is able to communicate ideas. They reported that on average an examiner marks between 350-400 scripts per exam. Head examiners said they had to mark between 800- 900 scripts.

Strengths of the Current SSC Test

According to teachers list of good test items on the test are (cloze test, summary writing, unseen comprehension, dialogue, story and report writing, vocabulary). They believe these items are effective.

One of the main strengths identified by a large number of teachers (10) was that the test helps students to achieve high grades. They reported that the test is easy and students are able to get high marks. They added that high passing rate in the exam helps to decrease the drop-out rate. A couple of teachers also considered the SSC text book to be good and useful. Another teacher observed that the strengths of the current SSC test are limited.

Weaknesses of the SSC Test

A number of teachers regarded the test as deficient as listening and speaking skills were non-existent both for classroom testing and public examinations. Two (2) teachers opined that the test does not help to improve the basic knowledge of students. They added that furthermore students are unable to write something on their own in the exam. They also pointed out the faults of the grading system as a glaring weakness and said the brilliant students are not getting their due. Another teacher talking about the shortcomings of the test said that 'it is an incomplete test. The system should be diversified'. One teacher observed "the test helps them to get good marks but does not help them to learn English as

a language”.

Four teachers mentioned one item i.e. rearrangement of sentences as highly confusing item on the test. Another teacher criticizing the same item said: “In the first paper there is a question (no.12) where students have to reorder a passage (given in a jumbled way) and write that according to sequence in a paragraph. He said “this is a frightening experience for students because even after a lot of practice they panic the night before the examination”. They are totally confused about the answer”. He added “the problem gets more complicated when the board’s instruction sheet prescribes only one answer whereas several answers are possible.

Suggestions for Improvement

The following suggestions were forwarded by teachers:

- A panel of experts be formed who will analyse the testing situation and find ways out of the crisis.
- Text books need to be made attractive and resourceful and lots of exercises need to be included.
- Textbook, syllabus and test must complement each other.
- The grading system should be revised. Division and marks system should be introduced.
- Listening and speaking should be tested and marks should be allocated for these skills.
- Training for setters, markers and moderators should be provided.
- Communicative language teaching and learning should be emphasized.
- International English Language Testing System (IELTS) format of testing should be introduced.

Perspectives of College Teachers on the HSC Test

Teacher cum examiner views on the HSC examination are presented below:

- A panel of experts be formed who will analyse the testing situation and find ways out of the crisis.
- Text books need to be made attractive and resourceful and lots of exercises need to be included.
- Textbook, syllabus and test must complement each other.
- The grading system should be revised. Division and marks system should be introduced.
- Listening and speaking should be tested and marks should be allocated for these skills.
- Training for setters, markers and moderators should be provided.
- Communicative language teaching and learning should be emphasized.
- International English Language Testing System (IELTS) format of testing should be introduced.

Views on the Terms 'Communicative,' 'Communicative Competence,' and Communicative Items on the Test

Majority (18) of the teachers were clear about the term 'communicative' and understood very well the components of a communicative syllabus. Almost everyone stated that 'communicative' means being able to use the four skills in different situations. One teacher said, "communicative means contact with a language through lots of activities". Another opined: "By 'communicative' I understand where four basic skills of the English language are developed but our test is not fully communicative." One teacher quoted, "communicative refers to activities which are interactive, students engage in pair work/group work activities and learning is student oriented".

A large number of teachers (16) teachers agreed that the syllabus is to some extent communicative as there is no scope for developing and practicing the listening and speaking skill.

Nineteen (19) out of twenty (20) respondents noted that the test was not testing communicative competence. They stated "the syllabus contents and textbook is communicative but the test is not communicative."

Respondents expressed the following views about communicative

items on the test:

- The HSC test reflects a communicative syllabus to a great extent in theory only.
- The current HSC test is basically failing to test communicative competence because the focus is only on reading and writing.
- Dialogue writing, substitution table, comprehension question and answers are some of the communicative items.
- Items like MCQ, cloze test, true/false, Information transfer which are supposed to be communicative are actually good ways of testing and reading and writing. These are not good for testing language skills.
- Rearrangement of sentences to complete a story is not related to the communicative approach.

Assessment of Skills on the Test

There was unanimous opinion (20) that only reading and writing skills are assessed and there is no scope for assessing listening and speaking skills.

Assessment of Writing and Reading Skills

All the respondents mentioned that writing skills were tested through the following items: paragraph, composition, dialogue, summary, story, letter, application and report writing. They reported that, open ended question answers format is also used.

Talking about the criteria used for marking teachers stated 'there is no specific criteria for marking'. Ten (10) out of twenty 20 teachers said marking is generally based on content and based on impression marking. Twelve (12) teachers stated that they analyze grammatical mistakes and the focus of correction is on grammatical accuracy and spelling. A couple emphasised the use of appropriate vocabulary in a written text. A few mentioned that when evaluating paragraphs and compositions they usually read the first and the last sentence of the written text. One (1) teacher stated that "if a piece of writing is correct and standard language

is used we generally give 80% marks. A couple of teachers provided a breakdown of percentage marks they award to students:

Excellent creative writing:	80%
Very good writing:	70%
Good writing:	50-60%

A large number of participants (18) mentioned that reading comprehension occupied a major part of the exam and reading was mainly assessed through reading comprehension questions and answers.

Two Papers

Almost all teachers felt both papers are important but suggested that listening and speaking should be included in the papers. Two (2) teachers commented that 'I personally believe there should be only one paper and language, literature and grammar should be combined. Another teacher said "one paper can assess writing, reading and grammar together."

Variety of Test Items on the Test

Seventeen (17) teachers stated that there is variety on the test but new items could be included. One teacher suggested incorporating 'translation'. Another teacher observed that 'there is no variety as 30marks are allocated for fill in the blanks and 14 marks for rearrangement. Rearrangement should have less marks." A couple suggested that, "substitution and rearrangement can be excluded from the test". Another teacher pointed to the repetition of gap filling exercises in both papers.

Assessment of Grammar

Teachers pointed out that grammar was mainly assessed through: fill in the blanks, substitution table, testing of grammar items like tenses, verb forms, voice, preposition, articles. They informed that 40 marks were allocated for the grammar section.

Role of Prediction

Teachers commented that 'prediction' plays a very important role in

test taking because questions are set in a typical manner. They said that prediction encourages students to study and prepares them for the exam. In short it was found that questions on the test are to a great extent predictable and students prepare from a list of common questions.

Test Preparation

Students practice model tests, previous board questions given in test papers as part of test preparation. All teachers said majority of students learn by heart and memorize answers. They also go for private tuitions.

Teachers reported that they are in the habit of giving suggestions to students as some of the test items and broad and short questions are often repeated. They make students practice probable question types and conduct mock tests. Some compose paragraphs and compositions on a number of common topics and ask students to memorise the same and practice. Sometimes teachers help students by revising what they have taught previously.

Four of the respondents were paper setters. Four of the teachers were examiners and they informed that they mark between 300-400 scripts. They said they get an instruction sheet from the board with mark allocation. Two said they had received training at NAEM.

Grading System

Teachers stated that the grading system is good but teachers need more training and awareness to assess students in a befitting manner. In general they opined that the system is standard and the grading system is reasonable but there should be further breakdown of grades covering the range 80-100. They have requested the board to provide both marks and grades in the transcript. Majority have suggested that the range 80-100 (which specifies the range between A-A+) be narrowed since they perceive the gap to be wide. They suggest that the gap should be bridged and specific criteria or range should be set to distinguish between A and A+. They opine 80-100 should be categorized as 'A' and 90-100 should be considered 'A+'. They added that the total marks need to be reflected in the mark sheet.

Test Specifications

A good number of teachers (8) said 'the general trend is no

specifications are given but sometimes efforts are made to draw them on an individual level'. Four said 'this is fixed by the NCTB, i.e. the text book board. Specifications are laid out in the textbook and sample questions are given in the book. Eight teachers said "we do not give any test specifications"'.

Examiners and Setters

Teachers reported that they had noted that sometimes paper setters are biased by particular guidebook writers. They set questions from the guidebooks. They informed that in 2008 one question on 'transformation' was lifted from a particular guide book which carried 5 marks. This refers to the business of testing which is a serious issue for consideration. Examiners also reported, "head examiners call examiners to pass students who failed to obtain pass marks".

Strengths of the HSC Test

Nearly all the teachers highlighted the following strengths of the test:

- Variety of question types on the test.
- Scope for obtaining good grades and high marks in the test. The objective questions and predictive nature of questions help students to get high marks.
- The emphasis on writing items.
- One teacher commented positively, "the strengths of the current HSC test are less than its weaknesses".

Weaknesses of the Current HSC Test

- absence of listening and speaking test items
- Invigilators are not well trained and do not have adequate information about some test items.
- A large number of teachers criticised Question No 12 (paper 1) which is reordering/rearrangement of sentences. It was commented that it is a good class activity but not a good test item. Moreover, no specific guidelines for reordering sentences are given to examiners. Only one answer is provided in the answer key whereas it may be rearranged in several

ways. It was labelled a confusing question since the board prescribes only one correct answer.

- Lack of examiner training was highlighted as a major weakness. They reported that only a short meeting is held where briefing is given about mark allocation.

Suggestions from Teachers

The following suggestions were forwarded by teachers:

- Inclusion of speaking and listening tests
- Avoiding repetition of questions on the test.
- Clear guidelines for setters and markers for Question No. 12, (i.e., re-ordering/rearrangement of sentences).
- The issue of having one or two papers may be discussed with teachers and a consensus arrived at.
- Provision of audio-visual classroom activities to help students improve listening and speaking skills.
- Proper training facilities for teachers, setters and markers.
- Remuneration for marking scripts should be increased.
- Emphasis on helping students acquire communicative competence.

Discussion of SSC and HSC Tests

This section discusses the findings presented earlier. Since the research is qualitative in nature the emphasis is on individual values more than the percentages. Since teachers from both SSC and HSC expressed similar views regarding the different dimensions of the test, this discussion is based on joint findings from teacher perspectives about SSC and HSC tests. First, the findings are discussed under the headings according to which information was elicited.

Teachers' View on 'Communicative' and 'Communicative Competence'

Teacher's views on the term 'communicative' reveals that teachers are familiar with the terms to a certain extent and understand what the

terms ‘communicative’ and ‘communicative competence’ mean. It is encouraging to note that teachers, despite working in a context which is new to the communicative approach, have a fairly clear knowledge about the new terminology and what it entails. However, at the same time they are aware that theoretically these tests reflect a communicative syllabus but in practical terms they are not fully communicative. In a study conducted in Bangladesh (Haider, 2003), similar responses were recorded by the researcher about SSC teacher views on their understanding of the term ‘communicative’. It was found that: “Bangladeshi teachers have a basic understanding of communicative use of English. The teachers demonstrated their awareness of learning English ‘to use in real life situations’ or ‘for making meaningful contacts and exchanging views with each other.’”

Teachers believe that the SSC and HSC examinations are partially assessing ‘communicative competence’ as only two skills – reading and writing are being assessed and speaking and listening are being ignored and not taught and tested. They also reported that the weighting for grammar is higher in the second paper. Similar statements were made by teachers in another study (Haider, 2003) where they stated that “they think the SSC examination is testing communicative competence to some extent”. They also mentioned the absence of listening and speaking tests. In the same study teachers suggested that oral proficiency tests should be introduced to make the SSC examination more ‘communicative’. However, the same study revealed that teachers have very little experience of using communicative test items practically and have very basic ideas about the ingredients of a communicative test.

There seems to be some kind of a confusion regarding the list of communicative items. Most of the teachers identified communicative items as dialogue writing, completing a story, paragraph and composition writing. However a few teachers considered MCQ, true/false, information transfer to be communicative items too because they felt these were good ways of testing reading and writing.

Assessment of Skills

All teachers unanimously agreed that only two skills are tested and there is a focus on grammar as well. For assessment of writing skills

they mentioned items such as paragraph, composition, dialogue, report and story writing in addition to letter, application and report writing. Most of the respondents identified these as communicative items as students are expected to write answers to these questions spontaneously and creatively.

About the assessment of writing the majority assessed that writing is assessed holistically. Some emphasised the focus on grammar and spelling. Some mentioned that the highest marks awarded for writing was 70 or 60%

They stated that reading skills are tested mainly through comprehension questions. Grammar is assessed through a number of items such use prepositions, articles, verb forms, transformation of sentences etc. They repeatedly mentioned that speaking and listening skills are not assessed.

Grading System

The majority hailed the grading system to be good and standard. However, some had reservations and demanded that the range of marks between 80-100 should be further broken down in order to do justice to high achievers. Teachers seemed to be unhappy with the fact that the student who scores 80 out of 100 has an 'A' and a student who scores 90 also has an 'A'. They suggested revising the existing grading system to ensure fairness and to suppress discontent.

Variety of Test Items

Most of the teachers informed that that the test covered an adequate range of items.

Two English Papers on the Test

Nearly all the teachers support offering two papers and felt both are necessary as there is scope to cover a variety of items. A couple of teachers argue that one paper should be adequate to cover a combination of literature, language and grammar items.

Role of Prediction

All teachers reported that 'prediction' plays a very strong role in the test. It helps teachers, guidebook writers and private practitioners to

guide students.

Test Preparation

Teachers expressed strong opinions regarding the role of test preparation. It appears from their response that test preparation is extremely important and dominates all teaching and learning. In fact teachers categorically commented that in Bangladesh teaching and learning depend on memorisation. The effect of negative back wash is noticed here as teachers teach to the test.

Teachers stated that they prepare students by making them solve previous years test papers, giving mock tests and by engaging students in revision work. They also stated that students on their own engage in reading their text book, practice different model questions from the text papers. Based on suggestions from teachers students select some paragraph and composition topics and prepare notes and learn them by heart.

It was gathered from teachers that the most significant activities for SSC and HSC test preparation included: practicing grammar exercises, paragraphs, composition, letter, report, reading comprehension questions and answers. There is a high level of demand for private tuitions- from students who wanted to get high marks, A and A+ on the test.

It was found that lessons from private tutors concentrated on preparation of the actual test tasks or question types. In short the sessions are test focused and guide students to cope with the test. Students practice a lot of grammatical structures which are expected to be on the test in addition to memorizing paragraphs, compositions and letters.

An analysis of the information shows that there is ample evidence of washback effect because both teachers and students are hooked to the practice of test tasks rather than developing academic language proficiency. This finding corroborates with a study on IELTS test preparation carried out by Hayes and Read (2004) in New Zealand, where teachers and students also narrowly focus on the practice of test items.

Setting/Marking/Test Specifications and Examiner Training

Commenting on issues related to examination it was found that out of

14 teachers at the SSC level 10 were examiners and three (3) were setters. At the HSC level out of 20 teachers 17 were examiners and 5 were setters.

Majority (18) of the teachers interviewed were unaware of test specifications. Some (10) said they draw test specifications and it is printed in the textbook. It may be commented that teachers perhaps are not familiar with this technical term. It appears that except a few, in general teachers have no clear idea about the issues of test construction, design, marking and administration. In order to design sound tests the specifications need to be clear and teachers require to know how to write test items and how to design a question paper. It is important to draw clear specifications as it dispels confusion and provides informed guidelines.

A large number of teachers reported that they did not receive any examiner training. A small number mentioned that when they went to collect scripts from the board they had a short briefing session. Setters and markers need specific instructions for setting valid question papers and ensuring fair marking.

Strengths of the SSC and HSC Tests

The main strengths identified were variety of items on the test and the scope for obtaining good grades and high marks.

Weaknesses of the SSC and HSC Tests

The marked weakness were absence of listening and speaking components on the test, lack of test specifications, examiner training and proper guidelines for scoring and grading. The predictive nature of questions on the test and the dependence on private tutors was also highlighted as a major weakness.

A summary of the interview findings presented above give an overview of teachers' perspectives about some major aspects of the SSC and HSC tests. As mentioned earlier, these are final achievement tests and work to a great extent as gate keepers for entry into coveted tertiary institutions. According to the objectives specified in the syllabus the current tests are supposed to be testing communicative competence but in reality they are far from being a test of communicative ability although some teachers have said that they are partially testing

communicative competence and there are some communicative items on the test. The writing tasks do not appear to be communicative and there is no clear and uniform marking criteria for assessing writing tasks. Listening and speaking according to the syllabus are considered to be 'two necessary fundamental skills'. This is true only in theory and on paper and these are not taught, practiced or tested. There needs to be an equal focus on the four skills and listening and speaking must be tested if achieving communicative competence is the goal. Therefore, these tests are not meeting two fundamental qualities of good tests- reliability and validity.

It is important that SSC and HSC tests are designed on sound principles. In addition the objectives, purpose and test specifications for these tests need to be drawn with utmost care, clarity and precision so that students are not disadvantaged. Findings revealed that the majority of the teachers are not clear about test specifications. Test specifications have to be explicit and it is imperative that SSC and HSC test specifications be in harmony with the syllabus objectives and the test formats be based on those test specifications. These specifications need to be not only clearly spelled out but also available for teachers, students and administrators of all the education boards.

A standard and acceptable marking scheme for assessing writing tasks as well as objective items needs to be in place to ensure fair and reliable marking. Currently acceptable responses are not laid out for teachers and there seems to be no uniform marking criteria or test rubric which teachers can follow across the different boards.

We know that policy makers are aware of the power of tests and use them to manipulate their local educational systems. We are also aware that the results of these tests affect the educational process and the students to a great extent. They also exert a great influence on the classroom practices and test practices. A most common and often repeated complaint from educators, researchers and policy makers is that, even after 12 years of studying English, students in Bangladesh cannot speak or write English correctly. Views from teachers about the issue of test preparation and prediction reveal that students are heavily dependent on private tuitions and bank on suggestions. Note has to be taken that pedagogical changes and proficiency levels cannot be developed if there is negative backwash and if teachers are testing to the

test from the beginning. Findings of this study reveal that test preparation is basically teaching to the test in a narrow way. If learners are taught to teach in a restricted way by cramming for the test and focusing on set question types/ topics their proficiency level will never improve. Therefore, the wash back effect needs to be taken seriously as it has a grave impact on the high stakes environment of the SSC and HSC.

Recommendations

Based on the findings the following suggestions are proposed.

Orientation to Communicative Language Testing

Teachers need more rigorous orientation to the communicative approach to teaching and learning and familiarity with the components of communicative language testing.

Testing of Four Skills

Currently only two skills are assessed. In order to develop the proficiency level of the students all the four skills need to be developed in the classroom and tested in the examination.

Writing Tasks

The writing tasks on the exam paper, in particular paragraph, composition, letters, reports should not be predictable or repeated because this will discourage students from cramming or memorizing set answers. Moreover, writing tasks and topics need to be set in a meaningful context with designated and clear audience and purpose in mind if the test aims to measure communicative competence.

Need for the Establishment of Standardized Marking and Sound Marking Criteria

Uniformity of marking and standard procedures for assessment needs to be introduced. A clear marking scheme and reliable marking criteria both for objective and subjective questions should be provided to examiners. The marking key should specify all possible answers so that students are not penalized.

Test Validation

Studies of wash back and impact need to be carried out because they play a key role in the validation of tests. In addition local validation studies need to be carried out. Data could be collected on subsequent student performance from the different boards and the scores could be compared with a range of criterion measures.

Revision of Grading Policy

The grading policy needs to be revised. Teachers have expressed dissatisfaction with the existing grading policy. The top achievers need to be distinguished from the others. It has been argued that the existing grading policy does do justice to the real merit of the students (See Haider, 2008). The range 80 -100 which represents grade 'A' is too broad because a student at the lower end and higher end of this continuum will both get A's. It is not fair for a student who got 97 to be in the same category as a student who obtained '80'. The range should be split and both grades and marks should be spelled out in the transcript.

Clear Guidelines for Students

Students should be given clear guidelines about what to expect in the test and also information about what criteria they will be assessed on.

Examiner Training

Examiner training is crucial. Setters, moderators, markers (writing & oral) and invigilators should be provided with the opportunity to attend training at regular intervals. Model scripts should be available for examiners as a reference point. If we are to introduce testing of speaking then training of oral examiners is a must.

Ongoing Workshops on Classroom and Large Scale Testing

Ongoing workshops on classroom and large scale testing should be conducted at regular intervals. Teachers need to attend workshops and short courses on testing in order to get clear ideas about test design, test formats, test specifications and other language testing related concerns.

Research on Assessment

The Ministry of Education should form a testing Unit comprising of testing experts, senior and experienced examiners, foreign consultants to conduct research on assessment related issues. The research finding should be shared, disseminated and published.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of SSC and HSC exams should be carried out to inform the test development and decision making process. Tests need to be evaluated in the light of test specifications and the results need to be analysed in relation to program objectives. The purpose is to revise the test in the light of feedback obtained and address the problem areas.

Examiner feed back should be gathered, collated and sent out to examiners.

Clear Assessment Policy

The government should invite the views of all stakeholders and form a clear and transparent testing and assessment policy.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided an overview of teachers' perspectives about some major aspects of the SSC and HSC tests. Some developments have been made in the area of assessment and testing in Bangladesh since the eighties. Currently, we have a major challenge ahead in revamping the whole testing system. In particular if we decide to focus on the four skills and include the testing of speaking and listening we are up against another big challenge because this will require in addition to marker training, training of oral examiners and logistic and acoustic support for holding listening tests. We need to ponder on costs and feasibility issues.

To wrap up we again need to be reminded that the SSC and HSC tests are crucial since they are 'high stakes' test and control to a significant extent access to prestigious university places. Therefore, a clear assessment policy is the need of the hour. Assessment procedures

should be transparent to all the stakeholders concerned and not be shrouded in mystery. Spolsky (1978, p.1284) very aptly comments “avoid mysticism, keep testing an open process, to be willing to account for the tests, and to explain to the public and to the people we are testing what we are doing. We must make sure that tests are used very carefully”.

In order to ensure healthy assessment policy makers, teachers administrators and all other stakeholders need to strive for a fit between curriculum goals, textbooks and tests. Systematic and commissioned investigations and evaluations of the SSC and HSC tests need to be carried out in order to get comprehensive insights about the effect and impact of these tests which have a profound effect on student lives.

Finally, there were some limitations of this study. This study was an exploratory study and mainly qualitative in nature and some general questions were asked to respondents. Due to time constraints data was not collected from multiple sources or participants. Therefore, triangulation of data was lacking. The sample size was also not very big and there was dearth of published research in the Bangladeshi context in the relevant field.

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18. (a) Are you an examiner? How many scripts do you mark?
(b) Have you received any examiner training?
19. What are the strengths of the current SSC/HSC examination?
20. What are the weaknesses of the current SSC/HSC examination?
21. Any suggestions for improvement?

APPENDIX 2

SSC TEACHER PROFILE

1. Age Group:

25-32 years	33-40 years	41-49 years	50+ years
4	3	4	3

2. Years of Experience as a Teacher:

Below 5 years	Above 5 years	Above 10 years	20+ years
1	3	7	3

3. Years of Experience as Examiner:

No experience	Below 5 years	Above 10 years	20+ years
7	3	2	2

4. Years of Experience as Setter:

No experience	Years of Experience
0	20

5. Gender:

Male	Female
11	3

APPENDIX 3**HSC TEACHER PROFILE****1. Age Group**

25-32 years	33-40 years	41-49 years	50+ years
9	4	3	4

2. Years of Experience as a Teacher

Below 5 years	Below 10 years	Above 10 years	20+ years
4	8	1	7

3. Years of Experience as Examiner

No experience	Below 5 years	Below 10 years	Above 10 years	20+ years
3	8	2	6	1

4. Years of Experience as Setter

No experience	Years of Experience
13	5

5. Gender

Male	Female
12	8

APPENDIX 4

SSC AND HSC TEST FORMAT

SSC Test Format

The English test consists of two papers – Paper I and paper 11. Each paper is of three hours duration and carries 100 marks. Paper is divided into three sections. Paper 1 consists of:

- | | |
|-------------------------------|------------|
| 1. Part A: Seen Comprehension | : 40 marks |
| 2. Part B: Vocabulary | : 20 marks |
| 3. Part 3: Guided Writing | : 40 marks |
-

Total: 100 marks

Paper 11 also carries 100 marks and is divided into two sections

- | | |
|------------------------|------------|
| 1) Part A: Grammar | : 40 marks |
| 2) Part B: Composition | : 60 marks |
-

Total: 100 marks

This paper contains both subjective and objective test items. Objective items include tasks such as true/false, multiple choice and gap filling with clues. In addition students have to perform tasks such as making sentences form a substitution table, joining sentence, matching words or phrases. Seen and unseen comprehension form an important section of the test. Students also have to answer short questions based on the text. The subjective questions include composition (report writing, application, dialogue writing) paragraph and summary writing. An analysis of the test specification shows that that the focus of the test is one reading and writing. From the year 2008 a grammar component has been added to the test.

HSC Syllabus and Test Format: The HSC English Test

Paper I comprises of three sections:

1. Seen Comprehension (objective and open questions): 40 marks
2. Vocabulary (cloze test with/without clues): 20 marks
3. Guided Writing: 40 marks

Total: 100 marks

Paper II:

- 1) Unseen Comprehension: (objective questions include MCQ, true/false, filling in gap with clues, information transfer, making sentences with substitution tables, matching phrases) More free questions will include open ended, filling in the gaps without clues, summarising, making notes and re-writing: 40 marks
- 2) Grammar: (Cloze test with/without clues) 20 marks
- 3) Writing: (semi-guided to free writing) 40 marks

Total: 100 marks