

# Reasons Why We Lag Behind: Qualms of Teaching English Writing in Secondary Levels of Rural Bangladesh

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## ABSTRACT

Writing is one of the noteworthy factors of four major language skills. However, teaching English writing is a difficult and troublesome task for the teachers in the village areas of Bangladesh albeit to the maximum preference was given to writing modules in rural secondary schools. The present study aimed at looking into issues that hinder the advancement and effectiveness of teaching English writing at secondary school levels in rural Bangladesh. It was also investigated if the methods, materials, environments, curricula, and class sizes were congenial to the effective learning and teaching. The researcher used a mixed method approach. Both qualitative and quantitative methodology by analyzing documents, observing and interviewing of secondary school teachers and learners from different rural schools were used to conduct the study. It was observed that learners had almost no opportunity to practice critical writing in classroom settings. Seldom were they taught the writing strategies including pre-writing, brainstorming, and branching. Most often students were reluctant to the strategy of idea generation—drafting—revising. Among many obstacles, the study reveals the followings: low salary of teachers, learners' inertia; obscurity in foreign language policies, qualms in curricula, dearth of resources and training facilities. Results from this study found plenty of incongruity between teachers' perception and practice in writing classes. The authenticity of this paper is not marginalized to the context of a particular institution in remote Bangladesh, but is hoped to reach further to regional institutions which are facing similar problems.

## 1. Introduction

The writing process creates more complexity since the learners require paying more heed to the entire pattern or structure of many parameters like idea generation, word choice, grammar, motivation and so forth. Lee (2019) asserted that it is the most challenging task and the most difficult language skill. Writing is inextricably connected to the thinking processes and ideas that let readers know the opinion, idea and attitude of writers in a specific arena. However, teaching writing in forms of letter, paragraph and essay in secondary level is a challenging activity since young learners are prone to change their mode relentlessly and they often find it astronomically difficult to sit still for a long time (Juhana, 2014). Hence, the urgency for well-motivated, truly qualified, dedicated and well-trained teachers of English writing to secondary learners is beyond description. This can be achieved through carefully planned teacher

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education programs (Ayman Sabry Daif-Allah & Fahad Hamad Aljumah 2020). Almost all Bangladeshi students fall in distress in writing English although learners are traditionally bound to write essays, paragraphs, letters and general statements. Students have this dilemma since they have a paucity of vocabulary and motivation along with ineffective classroom activities. Teacher interventions help writing development at any stage (Tompkins, 2008; McCarries, Pinnell & Fountas, 2000). According to Hasan (2004) very few teachers know how to lesson plan should be made and most of the teachers thought it was just the list of topics or sub topics that they will teach in the classes. Besides other language skills, Bangladesh national Policy (NEP, 2010) has paid a considerable heed to improve learners' writing skill as well. The organization aimed not only improving their professional skills but also creating fruitful human resources. In the secondary and higher secondary levels, learners study English for 200 marks as a compulsory subject. Approximately half of the entire marks is allocated for improving writing skills (NCTB 2012). The overall efficiency and achievement of the maximum learners from secondary schools is frustrating and unsatisfactory, although the colossal amount of time devoted to English instruction (Hoque 1999). Along with observing 4 classes, the researcher interviewed 8 English teachers and 6 secondary learners from different schools from different rural regions of Bangladesh. It tried to find what difficulties do the English teachers actually face in secondary writing classes in rural Bangladesh and finally reached its conclusion.

## **2. Literature Review**

Saifur (2016) conducted research on "Teacher Perception and Practice of Teaching English Writing in the Secondary Schools of Bangladesh" and found that during the classroom observation, almost 66% learners were unable to plan or brainstorm before they started writing and it showed a clear incongruity with their perception of critical thinking. He asserted that there is a deficiency between the observations of the teachers and their classroom practices regarding nature of writing.

Kirby and Crovitz (2013) asserted that teaching writing is very troublesome, and it can be the most challenging ones out of four language criteria. Hapsari (2011) found that it is hardest for learners to organize ideas and connect them in a logical order. It is also difficult for them to be expert in different aspects of writing including punctuations, dictions, lexical resources and so forth.

Borg (2003) along with Barcelos (2003) examined that mixed approach research on teacher cognition might fine-tune multi-dimensional thought cycle of teachers towards a specific behavior, concept or action and that one particular method might not be capable of producing.

Mulbar (2013, p. 442) Asserts that students accustomed to receiving knowledge passively and teachers' domination in learning are no more relevant to the current teaching-learning needs.

Şenel (2018, p. 118) found that motivated students and teachers make the writing class more fun; thus academic performance can be enhanced and the negative factors including fear of failing, anxiety, or unwilling to write can be reduced.

Bui & Nguyen (2016) quoted that teaching English to young learners can be meaningful provided that the teachers have sufficient piece of knowledge of the target language, conscious of the pertinent methodology of teaching English at this stage of education and enthusiastic about teaching young learners.

Motivation is the most enchanting factor to all learning and a paucity of it may be a biggest obstacle faced by teachers, counselors, school administrators, and parents. Behavioral problems in the classroom often, or always, seem to be linked to the lack of motivation. Mat & Yunus (2014).

Many aspects like attitude, age, anxiety, motivation, aptitude, value, poverty may have influence on foreign language acquisition. The entire foreign language acquisition and motivation is closely connected with foreign language betterment. A great number of factors such as perseverance, classroom behavior and foreign language achievement are inextricably co-related with one another Rahman, (2005).

Another research conducted by Rahman (2018) found that students' class activity is not assessed by teachers to evaluate their learning. Teachers preferred oral assessment more because of its validity.

### *2.1. Objectives of the study*

Teaching English writing in a rural context of Bangladesh had been identified as one of the most complex labyrinths till date. The general objective of the study was to provide effective solutions to the mistakes made by teachers while teaching English writing in secondary school settings of rural regions of Bangladesh. Furthermore, the specific objectives were to investigate the problems related to curricula, methods, approaches, environment and so forth. Also after investigating all of these notions, the study would reach its own recommendation. It is however, also hoped that the study would be able to explore the aspects that the previous researchers did not pay heed to.

### *2.2. Significance of the study*

Before writing anything, learners are to brainstorm first. They are to provide lexical cohesion and coherence along with task achievement. Nevertheless, very few researches in this regard particularly in the area of rural Bangladeshi secondary schools have been conducted. This research however, is worthwhile since the findings of the study will certainly provide the learners and teachers many significant insights about various notions related to teaching English writing in a proactive way. In addition, it will identify the appropriateness of different methods and approaches used by teachers in secondary English writing classes in the context of rural Bangladesh. Teachers and learners will get a chance to explore their insight through this study. Moreover, besides opening doors for further relevant study, researchers will be able to explore different English writing settings like objectives, materials, methods, approaches, evaluations.

## **3. Methodology**

The researcher conducted the study through a mixed method approach. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods in the stages of data collection and data analysis was used. While observing different classroom activities, the researcher collected qualitative data. On the contrary, it was questionnaire surveys from which quantitative data were collected. It was designed to investigate whether the methods, materials and motivations applied by the teachers let learners know the English writing effectively. To ensure the broad and accurate pieces of information, the researcher relied on 250 secondary students from rural Bangladesh, 8 English Language teachers along with some other relevant documents. The researcher also observed 6 English writing classes from Noakhali district of Bangladesh. The participants were coded as TP (teacher participant); SP (student participant); The teachers interviewed had at least ten years teaching experience. All the participants were both male and female and they were chosen randomly. The researcher used in-depth interviews, direct observations of the participants (Writing classes) and document analysis. While conducting the research, the researcher was aware of the interview protocol refinement (IPR) framework (Hoque 2016) comprised of a four-phase process that includes a) affirming interview questions accompanied with research

questions; b) conducting an inquiry-based conversation; (3) receiving feedback on interview protocols, and (4) piloting the interview protocol.

#### 4. Results and discussion

In classroom settings, the teachers are to teach how to write paragraphs, dialogues, letters, e-mails, stories and compositions. Both teachers and learners are very passionate to what to write rather than how to write. Most often, teachers did not discuss writing criteria (Brainstorming, lexical resources, appropriate choice of dictions, and proper usage of transitional devices). Rather they gave learners some homework and told them to memorize specific pieces of writing (letter, paragraph, story and composition). That means the study found that learners are only aware of learning by rote to be passed in writing examinations. Furthermore, Majority of the teachers didn't make lesson plans beforehand. The following figure demonstrates the scenario of learners' accuracy in seven different arenas of effective pieces of writing. 250 students in 6 classrooms were asked to write the same piece of writing on a current issue and the result was the following.

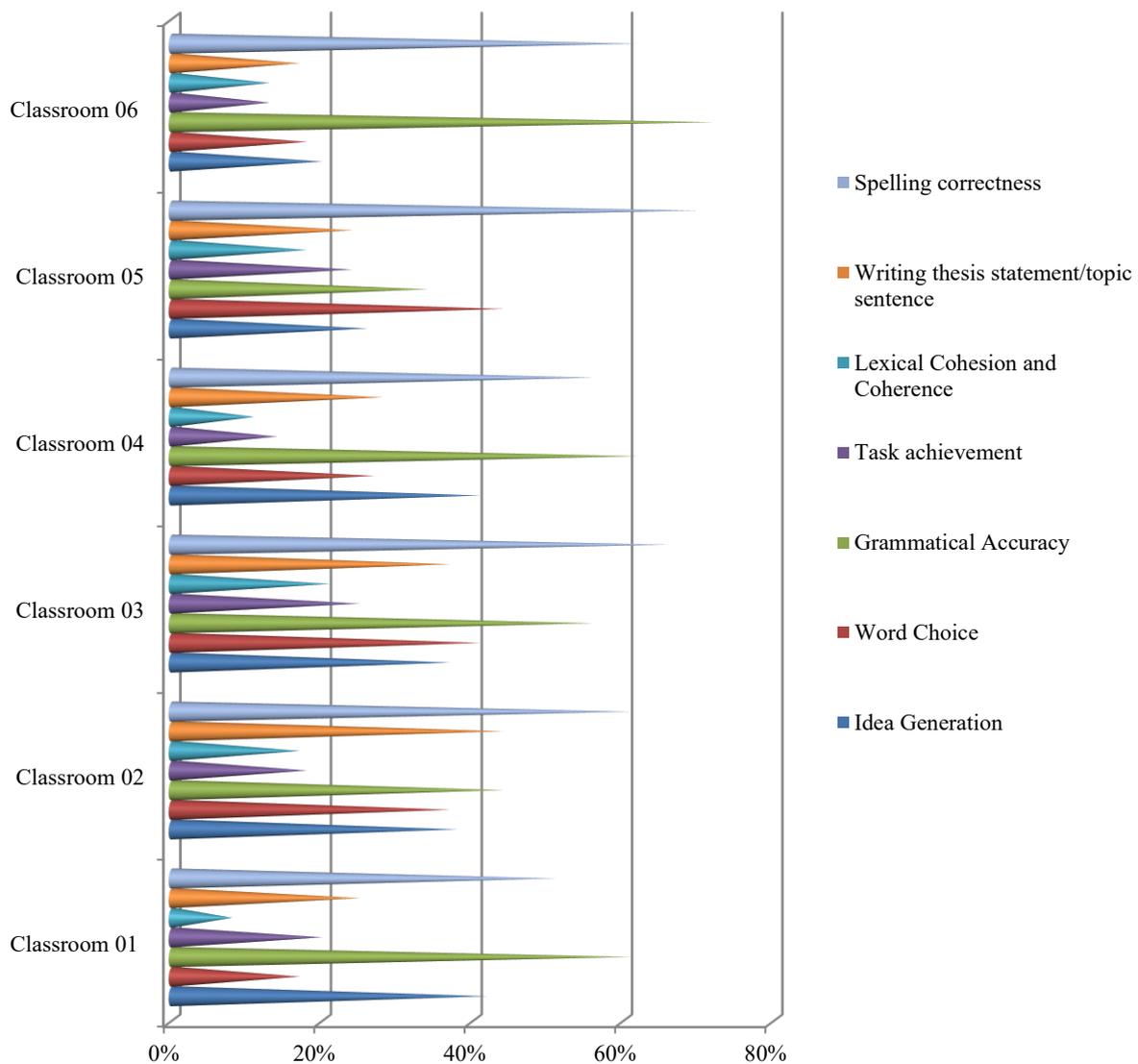


Figure 1. Results of classroom observations

As showed in the figure, learners have a good command over grammatical accuracy and spelling correctness compared to other parameters. The study found that although learners made a lot of simple sentences rather using a combination of compound and complex, they have a good command in grammatical accuracy. An average of 55% students (Classroom 01 = 61%; Classroom 02 = 44%; Classroom 03 = 56% Classroom 04 = 62% Classroom 05 = 34% Classroom 06 = 72%) has a moderate idea about grammatical issues. Though the learners made some mistakes, it was found that they are very prone to make little spelling mistakes. Classroom 01 made 51% correct spelling while Classroom 02, 03, 04, 05 and 06 made 61%, 66%, 56%, 70% and 62% correct spelling respectively. The study found that the students fell in a distress condition while ensuring Lexical cohesion and coherence and it was lucid that the learners in secondary schools in Bangladeshi perspective have a very least command (Classroom 01 = 08%; Classroom 02 = 17%; Classroom 03 = 21% Classroom 04 = 11% Classroom 05 = 13% Classroom 06 = 21%) over it (only 15% of total students knows how to provide it). However, only an average of 34% was able to generate ideas clearly before they started writing. Writing thesis/topic sentence is another area where students needed to improve. 25% in Classroom 01 wrote topic sentence/thesis statement correctly whilst Classroom, 02, 03, 04, 05, and 06 ensured 44%, 37%, 28%, 24%, 17% respectively. An average of 31% learners used a variety of word choices. (Classroom 01 = 17%; Classroom 02 = 37%; Classroom 03 = 41% Classroom 04 = 21% Classroom 05 = 44% Classroom 06 = 18%).

Table 1.  
*Numbers of grammatical mistakes in a particular paragraph*

Name of mistakes	Class	Class	Class	Class	Class	Class	Total	Mean
	1	2	3	4	5	6		
Sentence Fragment	4	3	4	5	2	4	22	3.66
Run on sentence	—	6	3	2	1	3	15	2.5
Punctuation	3	1	2	—	—	1	7	1.16
Using comma splice	—	—	3	2	—	4	9	1.5
Parallelism	3	1	2	1	—	—	7	1.16
Word order	—	4	3	2	1	—	10	1.66
Redundancy	3	3	3	5	4	2	20	3.33
Using preposition and other parts of speech	2	5	4	—	—	—	11	1.83
Subordination & coordination	—	—	2	1	3	3	9	1.5
Subject verb agreement	1	—	3	2	1	—	7	1.16

It was lucid that secondary school learners in Bangladeshi perspective made least mistakes in subject verb agreement, parallelism and punctuation whilst they were very prone to write Sentence Fragment, redundancy & run on sentences. The study also found that they had a very moderate amount of knowledge over Using preposition and other parts of speech, subordination & coordination along with word order. Almost 42% learners agreed that the materials selected for English writing class is very inadequate and boring. 12% SPs said that they hardly enjoyed the class as there was a huge paucity of motivation and appropriate materials. Another significant proportion (35%) said that the learning material and motivation they tend to enjoy was satisfactory. However, 11% were reluctant to provide their comment on it. It was felt that 10% of secondary school learners in Bangladesh didn't know whether the motivation and material used in the classroom prepared themselves. Also learners' comments on teachers' apathy, class size and duration of class have also been significantly observed.

#### 4.1. Usage of different strategies by teachers to enhance idea generation

As Table 2 show, it was found that TP 01 always used brainstorming for ideas while he sometimes used cluster mapping. He argued that he did not use other strategies (such as Free—

writing, Branching and Journalistic Questions) TP2 asserted that he only used Brainstorming as a medium of generating ideas. Alternatively, TP 3 said he used only Branching whilst TP 4 focused on Brainstorming. Interestingly, neither of the strategies were sufficiently practiced by TP 5. He was quite indifferent to any strategies that can be used to generate ideas before starting writing and he was in favour of writing without generating ideas beforehand. TP 6 was in favour of using Branching and Free—writing. TP 7 and TP 8 strongly recommended for Brainstorming. However, TP 7 also used Cluster Mapping but TP 8 said he used it sometimes. It was notably found that it was brainstorming which was very popular among the English teachers to teach how to generate idea in the secondary context of rural Bangladesh. Other strategies such as Free—writing, Branching, cluster mapping and Journalistic Questions are almost ignored by the teachers.

Table 2.  
*Teachers comment on how they teach idea generation*

	<b>Brainstorming</b>	<b>Free—writing</b>	<b>Branching</b>	<b>Cluster Mapping</b>	<b>Journalistic Questions</b>
TP 1	Yes	No	No	Sometimes	No
TP 2	Yes	No	No	No	No
TP 3	No	No	Yes	No	No
TP 4	Yes	No	No	No	Sometimes
TP 5	Sometimes	Sometimes	No	No	No
TP 6	Yes	Yes	No	No	No
TP 7	Yes	No	No	Yes	No
TP 8	Yes	No	No	Sometimes	No

#### 4.2. Findings of teachers' questionnaire survey

Table 3.  
*Teachers' comments*

<b>Questions</b>	<b>Responses</b>		
	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>
a) Teachers should use assessments to encourage students to take responsibility for their writing.	60%	0%	40%
b) Learners are reluctant to learn how to generate idea.	80%	20%	0%
c) Using target language while teaching writing	70%	30%	0%
d) Using multimedia to make learning fun	58%	0%	42%
e) Learners' should be involved in reading such as newspapers and journals	52%	0%	48%
f) Learners can evaluate their peers in learning writing	0%	55%	45%
g) Existing salary and training facilities are satisfactory	0%	100%	0%
h) Learners make errors in punctuation	40%	0%	60%
i) Learners certainly learn through errors	60%	0%	40%
j) Learners make sentence fragments occasionally	75%	25%	0%
k) Learners make mistakes in subject verb agreement	53%	47%	0%
l) Teachers have little timeframe to teach writing	85%	15%	0%
m) Learners are prone to pass in the exam rather learning writing as a whole	100%	0%	0%
n) Teachers should encourage learners memorize writing	51%	0%	49%
o) Learners often write run on sentences	37%	0%	47%
p) Teachers' experience play a vital role to teach writing	70%	30%	0%
q) Poverty hinders learning pathway	46%	0%	54%
r) Guardians should be aware of their children	60%	0%	40%
s) Learners' maintain lexical cohesion and coherence	0%	80%	20%
t) Government should have more control over teachers	40%	60%	0%

Majority of teachers recommended that they should use assessments to encourage students to take responsibility for their writing. All of them had the same comments that the training facilities and existing salary did not praiseworthy. Most of the teachers had the opinion that while writing, learners made mistakes in some aspects like subject verb agreement, sentence

fragment & lexical cohesion and coherence. They tend to say that learners were unwilling to learn how to write since they have a passion to pass in the exam by learning by rote. It was also observed that some teachers commented using target language can be a key in this regard.

TP 1, TP4 and TP 5 said that they have been using grammar translation method from the beginning of their career. Learners are reluctant to communicate in target language and therefore it is very difficult to let the learners know anything independently in the target language. Low—paid salary, huge deficiency in training facilities and guardian's negligence impede them to demonstrate in the classroom in an effective way. Others, however (TP2, TP3& TP6) asserted that since they were to teach approximately 50—60 students in a single classroom, they can seldom concentrate to make all of the learners involved in a particular class. Time allocation for a single class is only 45 minutes which deters them to make the learning fun, they added. The study strongly found that teachers mainly use traditional teaching methods such as copying from blackboard or book, handwriting, teaching some grammatical rules, memorizing some common paragraphs and not checking all the copies or giving proper feedback.

#### *4.3. Findings from the classroom observation*

While observing the classroom, the researcher found that teachers always emphasized on grammatical issues along with memorizing vocabularies rather than making learners think the writing as a whole. Most of the teachers are not familiar with latest innovation related to writing. The researcher observed most of the teachers teaching English language writing at the secondary level used Bangla and to some extent, local dialect as a medium of instruction in the classroom. It was found that teachers always emphasized on grammatical issues along with memorizing vocabularies rather than making learners think the writing as a whole. Most of the teachers are not familiar with latest innovation related to writing. Since the students in a class contained up to 60 students, it is very hard to create an effective learner—teacher involvement. In most cases, the environment was polluted by a large hue and cry created by the learners. The researcher seldom found that learners were capable of generating ideas before writing. In addition, there was a paucity of teaching and learning pre-writing—drafting—revising. Teachers are reluctant to teach thesis statements and topic sentences. In some cases teachers don't know what topic sentences mean. In 3 classes (out of 6) it was found that in forms of letter, application, paragraph and essay, learners were given some pieces of homework to memorize. On the following day, they were asked to deliver what they learnt at home. Surprisingly, in one classroom, teacher asked learners to deliver their homework (an application) in form of one-by-one conversation. Learners were very enthusiastic to produce small simple sentences. In addition, they often failed to connect ideas chronologically. Moreover, there is almost no central monitoring system. Most of the teachers in the rural areas were used to teaching through reading out guide book instead of using text books. What the learners and teachers were prone to practice in writing classes was isolating some vocabularies, studying some grammatical rules and learning some pieces of writing by heart. The researcher found that there is a dearth of effective motivation to write something. A good reader can be a good writer. However, there is almost no scope for the learners to read something like newspaper, magazine, journal and so on. Thus, in rural Bangladesh, learning and teaching English writing is still in a jarring situation.

The Table 4 shows time allocations by teachers for different activities related to effective writing in 4 different classrooms. The class duration of secondary schools in Bangladesh is usually 45 minutes.

Table 4.  
Findings of Classroom observation

	Class 1	Class 2	Class 3	Class 4	Class 5	Class 6	Time used per activity
Teaching vocabulary	4 min	5 min	2 min	5 min	3 min	5 min	24 min
Idea generation (brainstorming, free—writing, cluster mapping etc)	×	×	1 min	3 min	4 min	3 min	11min
Teaching grammar	5 min	4 min	7 min	4 min	4 min	4 min	28 min
Encouraging memorizing or copying	8 min	7 min	9 min	6 min	2 min	×	32 min
Teaching lexical cohesion and coherence	2 min	×	1 min	3 min	3 min	3 min	12 min
Topic sentence/thesis statement	2 min	×	2 min	1 min	1 min	1 min	7 min
Teaching reading to enhance writing	4 min	3 min	5 min	4 min	4 min	2 min	22 min
Peer review	3 min	×	×	4 min	2 min	3 min	12 min
Task achievement	2 min	4 min	3 min	2 min	2 min	2 min	15 min
Spelling issues	3 min	1 min	4 min	3 min	1 min	5 min	17 min
Evaluation of learners' writing	3 min	11 min	×	3 min	2 min	3 min	20 min
Miscellaneous (roll call, homework etc)	9 min	7 min	10 min	7 min	5 min	7 min	45 min
Total	45 min	42 min	44 min	45 min	30 min	38 min	244 min
Mean score				40.66 min			

## 5. Recommendation

- Learners must be taught how to write instead of teaching what to write.
- Prior to start writing, learners should be able to generate ideas (brainstorm/pre—writing/branching)
- Isolation of vocabularies along with implementation of grammar-translation method should be avoided.
- Adequate training facilities can be arranged to let teachers know how to write topic sentence and thesis statement.
- Learners and teachers must keep in mind that learning by rote cannot be a solution of learning writing.
- Authoritarian bodies are indifferent in overlooking teachers' responsibility. Hence, to some extent, teachers are not aware of teaching and learning methodology. Government should look over this implication through relevant authorities.
- The time allocation is too short to perform a full action related to effective writing. Therefore, time frame for classroom activities can be increased.
- Giving priorities to teach grammar should be avoided because learning grammar only cannot ensure writing.
- Usage of transition words should be taught.
- Teachers should avoid local dialect in the classroom. It also recommended that in a writing class, writing must result.

## 6. Conclusion

The researcher investigated the real scenario of teaching English in Rural Bangladesh. The more a man writes, the more he can write” (Burnham, 1994, p.114). This notion is almost entirely absent in secondary school English writing classes in Bangladesh. A teacher is considered as a proper mentor to create a congenial environment for learning. However, in most extents, the study found that the teachers were unable to do so. They were not up-to-date with technology. The study tried to investigate what methodology and curriculum had the teachers used to make a writing class fun. What are the writing criteria and to what extent do the learners are able to explore it. Based on the findings, the study reached its own recommendation. The study will play a pivotal role in learning and teaching English writing

not only in the village regions of Bangladesh but also in the classroom settings facing the same cruxes.

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