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Implementing a formative assessment model at the secondary schools: attitudes and challenges

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Abstract

This paper aims at exploring the issues related to implementing a formative assessment model namely School-Based Assessment (SBA) at secondary schools in Bangladesh. A qualitative study employing interviews with English teachers of grade 8 and the head teachers and FGDs with students from twelve secondary schools was conducted. Moreover, field notes and document analysis provided valuable data. The findings from the qualitative content analysis showed a dismal condition of implementing SBA in Bangladesh. Some distinct reasons posed challenges to implementing SBA. These are teachers' insufficient orientation towards SBA, teachers' negative attitude towards SBA, teachers' heavy workloads, large class size, large contents of syllabus, no reflection of the marks of SBA in public examinations, lack of honesty and fairness in teachers, lack of validity and reliability of SBA as an assessment tool, poor socio-economic conditions of teachers, and the absence of monitoring and supervision by concerned authorities. This study also provides a comprehensive understanding of how teachers conceptualize and apply strategies of SBA in their classrooms, along with some recommendations and, hence, bears implications for the policy makers, teacher trainers, and other stakeholders involved in the Bangladeshi school education system and elsewhere.

Keywords: SBA, English teachers, Head teachers, Students, Schools, Bangladesh

Introduction

Assessment plays a vital role in any teaching-learning process (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Dube-Xaba & Xulu, 2020). Reviews on the studies of assessment confirm that formative assessment (henceforth FA) can improve the academic achievement of students markedly (Black & Wiliam, 1998). In Bangladesh, till 2007, however, the role of teachers in relation to assessment used to go something like this: based on three terminal examinations (i.e., summative examination), teachers graded their students according to whether or not they had passed or failed (Begum & Farooqui, 2008). Consequently, the giving of marks and the function of grading were overemphasized, whereas the giving of feedback and the function of learning were underemphasized (Alam, 2018; Al Amin, 2017). As a result, students remained in ignorance in relation

to what teachers assessed, how they assessed, and how they communicated the results, and what was worth learning, how it should be learned, and how well they expected them to perform (Al Amin, 2017). On the other hand, teachers hardly knew about their learners' progress and difficulties with learning and could not adapt their own work to meet learners' needs.

Literature demonstrates the negative impact of such type of assessment on student learning (Ghazali, 2017). Reliance only on public or year-end examinations could negatively impact by wielding unconstructive effect on learners' emotional strength as an obstacle to their success (Stiggins, 2005). Moreover, it fails to detect the learners' learning needs or provide feedback in improving instructional practice and is incapable of assessing skills, e.g., students' school behavior, orally expressing thoughts, or their problem-solving skills (Begum & Farooqui, 2008).

In order to close this gap in assessment, following the trend in many countries where there has been a major shift from year-end once-off high-stakes assessment to School-Based Assessment (henceforth SBA) (Yates & Johnston, 2018), in 2007, as an attempt to revamp the quality of education at the secondary schools of Bangladesh (Azim, 2012), SBA was introduced in Bangladesh as a means of enhancing the validity and reliability of student assessment. Based on the features of assessment for learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998), SBA was an important educational shift for the schools, specifically for the teachers, and above all, for the entire education system. SBA has been adopted as a strategy for discouraging rote learning, removing examination pressure on teachers, and reducing the teachers' tendency to "teach to the test" (ADB, 2015:19), so that teachers could "assess their students' progress ... on an ongoing basis during the year ... and ... give regular feedback to their students to help them learn better" (Begum & Farooqui, 2008:46; Azim, 2012). SBA uses FA methodologies by teachers in order to realize timely corrective measured and actions, and it advocates the application of a variety of teaching-learning activities (ADB, 2015:20).

But another main study (Begum & Farooqui, 2008) which was basically a perception study conducted on teachers' attitude towards the implementation of SBA using teacher questionnaires and teacher interviews found a mixed feeling of optimism, apprehension, and doubt regarding the effectiveness of this means of assessment. In 2009–2010, a feasibility study was conducted on this SBA model. The study explored that this model was "too labor intensive" for classroom teachers, especially the reasons such as very large class sizes and insufficient training to prepare the students, etc. (ADB, 2015: 21). Interestingly, however, another contemporary study conducted as part of her MEd thesis by Purvin (2011) on how Bangladeshi students in Science classrooms make sense of SBA found four answers to her research questions. These are as follows: (1) SBA was being practiced is as planned. (2) Students possessed a good understanding of the features and objectives of SBA. (3) They believed that SBA was playing effective roles in shaping their process of learning, development of skills, and good behavior. (4) Insufficient infrastructural and manpower facilities such as inadequate classrooms, teaching aids, shortage of teachers, and lesson durations stood in the way of implementing SBA.

Although all these three studies found some common factors which hindered the process of implementing SBA at secondary schools in Bangladesh, they explored contradictory findings as far as stakeholders' attitudes towards SBA and the practice of

SBA are concerned. Moreover, none of these studies had seen the case from a holistic perspective by including teachers, head teachers, and students as respondents. Hence, Purvin (2011) suggested the future researchers to explore the views of both teachers and students while researching the implementation of SBA. Therefore, an empirical study including teachers, head teachers, and students as respondents was conducted to explore the implementation of SBA in English subject, the attitudes of both teachers and students towards SBA, and the challenges faced by the English teachers at secondary schools of Bangladesh.

In this research context of language testing, the uniqueness of the current study is multi-fold. First, there are only three studies conducted in this context, but none of these studies was conducted to explore the implementation of SBA in English classrooms specifically. Second, none of these incorporated the views of both teachers and students in the same study (Purvin, 2011). Hence, this study compensates the lack of studies in these two areas.

Literature review

Conceptualizing assessment and SBA

Assessment in the field of education is conceptualized as comprising two major phenomena: summative assessment (henceforth SA) or assessment of learning (AoL), and FA or assessment for learning (AfL) (Black and Wiliam, 2009). SA presents a final picture of students' academic achievement and is administered generally at the end of an academic semester or term to assess what students have learned and how well they have been taught (Black & Harris, 2014). It focuses on the final product and the end result of students' learning. It usually includes term final examinations, formal tests, or traditional examinations and projects, etc. (Dube-Xaba, & Xulu, 2020). On the other hand, FA is concerned with assessing the quality of learner responses in various pieces of work to shape and improve the learner's competence. Thus, FA is "a practice of eliciting, interpreting, and using student achievement to make decisions about the next step in instruction" (Black & Wiliam, 2009: 5). FA is expected to help learners grasp their subject/module content and other topics using facilitation and related pedagogies with the aim of achieving learning goals (Black & William, 2018). Although formative and summative assessment processes are presented in the above discussion as two discrete purposes for assessment, there is considerable overlap. Assessment information from both systems can be used to enhance teaching and learning.

School-Based Assessment (SBA) is a form of FA which measures students' performance and improvement that is planned, designed, developed, organized, and executed in the schools, by the respective school teachers within the curricular framework (Kapambwe, 2010; Tong & Adamson, 2015). It allows multiple evaluation techniques which verify students' knowledge, comprehension, and skills (Kapambwe, 2010). SBA lessens the power of formal terminal or year-end examinations by making provision for implementing a variety of other forms of assessment. Davison and Leung (2009) used a slightly different term, Teacher-Based Assessment (TBA), for this, although both denote the same phenomenon. They define TBA as an assessment system where English teachers "plan and/or implement appropriate assessment procedures to monitor and evaluate student progress in their own classrooms" (p.393).

Several meta-analyses in the arena of language testing and assessment provided evidence that formative SBA is effective in helping student language learning if it is effectively implemented (Grob et al., 2017; Weiss & Belland, 2016). Literature explores certain benefits of such types of assessment. Here, learners can demonstrate what they know and can do over a period of time and develop the capacity for peer and self-assessment, teachers get opportunities to give timely and comprehensive feedback to students (Havnes et al., 2012), and teachers can use a range of assessment techniques to approach diversified learning styles (Azim, 2012). It also helps foster learners' motivation (Faber & Visscher, 2018).

The introduction and practice of such types of assessment, however, is relatively a recent phenomenon. Introducing and implementing a new or innovative means of assessment is not a "simple matter" and "there is no quick fix that can alter existing practice by promising rapid rewards" (Black & Wiliam, 1998, p. 10). Teachers face a number of challenges in this regard. Aschbacher (1993) and Brindley (1998) are the two prominent researchers who worked on the viability and execution of different methods of assessment, their strengths, weaknesses, and successes. The study conducted by Aschbacher (1993) explored the following challenges in implementing alternative assessments. These are (a) teachers concentrated on assessing students' learning activities, not their outcomes; (b) they faced complications in fixing criteria for evaluating student work; (c) they faced assessment anxiety because of shortage of time to learn, plan, practice, use, and reflect on the procedures of assessment; (d) absence of teachers' focus on their teaching practices, professional exchanges regarding educational goals and methods, learners' manifold modes of expression; (e) they required training and continuing support; (f) they were unwilling to change; (g) there was lack of team involvement; and (h) there was lack of technical and administrative support.

Brindley (1998), on the other hand, identified three common issues and problems. These are (a) political issues, which focus on the objectives as well as the intended use of the assessment; (b) technical issues, which deal with validity and reliability; and (c) practical issues, which deal with the means by which the assessment was practiced.

Conceptualizing SBA in Bangladesh

Secondary Education Sector Improvement Project (SESIP) is a Tk 490 crore mega project jointly financed by the Government of Bangladesh and Asian Development Bank (ADB). One of the recommendations of the projects was the introduction of SBA from 2006 (Begum & Farooqui, 2008; Purvin, 2011). Since some of the very vital objectives of education, i.e., solving communication skill, clearly expressing thoughts orally, problem-solving skill, learning to behave properly, and developing appropriate social and personal values, could not be assessed through the year-end summative examinations held in Bangladesh, SBA came into place with a view to assessing these wider objectives (Begum & Farooqui, 2008; Purvin, 2011).

Student assessment at schools including SBA contains the following areas:

1. Students' coursework—the academic work students do in their classrooms and at their homes throughout the academic year. This course work has six different

- areas: class tests, class work, home work, assignments, oral presentations, and group work. Each of these areas carries 5 marks, reaching 30 marks in total.
2. Students' personal development—students' behavior in their schools, their involvement in co-curricular activities, and development of their social and personal values
 3. Students' performance in the year-end summative examinations (NCTB, 2006; p. vi)

Hence, the total marks (i.e., 100) for each subject including English are divided as 30% marks for SBA and 70% for terminal/summative examinations (NCTB, 2006; Azim, 2012). Teachers were instructed to keep a record of their students' performance on SBA, and the head teacher of the school must monitor this.

Although SBA in Bangladesh bears 30% marks, it adds to students' overall grading alongside 70% marks in the final summative examination. Such contribution of FA marks to candidates' overall grading caught several researchers' attention. Mitchell (2014) argues that FA in its pure form does not add to students' overall grading. He also articulates that FA is as much AfL as AoL which assesses students' progress during a course with a view to providing them the opportunity to improve. Likewise, Gipps (1994) comments that rather than using for purely formative reasons, assessment during a course may also be used for summative or grading purposes. Though the formative method of SBA in Bangladesh carried an impact on year-end terminal assessment, it had not been used to do a diagnostic assessment.

Challenges in implementing formative assessment in non-western countries

Literature proves that in non-western countries where there is dominance of teacher-centric practices and high-stakes public examinations, implementation of formative assessment faced challenges (Quyen et al., 2016).

For instance, a study conducted in Saudi Arabia found that effective implementation of formative assessment practices failed because of the presence of teacher-centric approaches in teaching and pressure on teachers to ensure students' success in the examinations, along with teachers' insufficient understanding about the principles of formative assessment and the ways to implement them in the classrooms (Al-Wassia et al., 2015). Arrafii and Sumarni (2018) surveying 243 school teachers in Indonesia found that English teachers there had a lack of understanding of formative assessment.

A study conducted in the same time (Sidhu et al., 2018) in Malaysian secondary schools found "time constraints, classroom enrolment, heavy workload, and lack of training as their main challenges against the effective implementation of the CEFR-aligned SBA" (p. 452). Other Malaysian studies (Fook et al., 2011; Ong, 2010) also identified teachers' lack of formative assessment skills and subsequent suggested professional training.

Berry (2011) also found teachers in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong "were not capable of translating AfL [Assessment for Learning] theories into classroom practices" (p. 59). In spite of having guidelines, teachers required more detailed and concrete information on the ways of implementing formative assessment in the classrooms.

Studies in South Africa (Byabato & Kisamo, 2014; Kanjee & Sayed, 2013; Maile, 2011; Omorogiuwa & Aibangbee, 2017) also identified insufficient knowledge of teachers and inadequate training along with time constraints and lack of resources (Dube-Xaba & Xulu, 2020; Reyneke, 2016) as barriers to a successful implementation of SBA. Other studies (Grob et al., 2017; Weiss & Belland, 2016) suggested employing technology in the design of formative assessment to overcome obstacles, for example, large classes with diverse students and wide-ranging curriculum requirements.

All in all, the purpose of the study was to investigate the scenario of implementing SBA, attitudes of both teachers and students towards SBA, and the challenges teachers faced in implementing SBA in relation to English as a compulsory subject. This study answers the following research questions.

- (i) How is SBA implemented in English as a compulsory subject?
- (ii) What are the attitudes of English teachers and students towards SBA?
- (iii) What are the challenges English teachers faced in implementing SBA?

Method

Participants and the instruments

This empirical study is based on qualitative data. Required data for the study were collected through semi-structured interviews with English teachers of grade 8 and head teachers and focus group discussions (FGDs) with students from twelve secondary schools of Bangladesh. For selecting these sample schools, typical case sampling (Patton, 2002) was applied in this study so that an illustrative profile could be provided using a representative case. It enabled us to “illustrate or highlight what is typical, normal, average” (p. 243).

The following table reflects the teachers’ characteristics in terms of their gender, age, practical experience of teaching, educational qualification, trainings, and location (Table 1).

Table 1 Profile of the sampled English teachers

Teacher	Gender (M/F)	Age	Experience (years)	Qualification	Training	Area of school
T1	Male	45	17	BSS, MSS, BEd	SBA, CEC, EIA	Urban
T2	Female	38	12	BA, MA	CEC, EIA	Rural
T3	Male	41	13	BA, BEd	ELTIP, EIA	Rural
T4	Female	43	10	BA, BEd	ELTIP, CEC, EIA	Urban
T5	Male	37	10	BSc, BEd	ELTIP, CEC, EIA	Rural
T6	Female	47	19	BSS, BEd	ELTIP, SBA, EIA	Urban
T7	Male	52	26	BA, BEd	ELTIP, SBA, EIA	Rural
T8	Female	46	20	BA, BEd	ELTIP, EIA, CEC	Urban
T10	Male	42	14	BA, MA	ELT, EIA	Rural
T11	Male	46	20	BA, BEd	ELTIP, EIA	Rural
T12	Female	38	14	BSS, MSS	ELTIP, EIA	Urban

BA Bachelor of Arts, *BSc* Bachelor of Science, *BSS* Bachelor of Social Science, *BEd* Bachelor of Education, *MSS* Master of Social Science, *ELTIP* English Language Teaching Improvement Project, *CEC* Communicative English Course, *SBA* School-Based Assessment, *EIA* English in Action

The head teacher and one English teacher from each of these twelve schools were interviewed. Besides, twelve FGDs with students of grade 8 (one from each of these twelve English teachers of grade 8) were conducted. Each FGD comprised 9 students. Selection of the respondents of the FGDs was done purposively so that participation of students of every merit (high, mediocre, and low) level could be ensured. Moreover, field notes and document analysis provided valuable data.

In line with the objectives of the study, the contents of the interviews and focus group protocols focused on respondents' understanding of SBA, their attitudes towards it, assessment criteria and process in SBA, the role of teachers and students, the barriers of implementing SBA, and respondents' opinions and recommendations for its effective implementation.

All the interviews and FGDs were carried out in Bangla, because teachers and students preferred to converse in Bangla. These were transcribed first in Bangla and then were translated into English. In order to confirm the reliability of the data, these translations were verified by one of our colleagues who teaches English at a university in Bangladesh.

A transcript-based analysis approach (for teacher interviews) and a tape-based analysis (for FGDs) approach (Krueger & Casey, 2009) were used to deal with the interview and FGD data. Each of the interviews and FGDs was transcribed word by word. For each of the transcripts, individual coding was done and data were coded before these were being classified into themes, and eventually, connections were sought across the themes. The-matic analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2016) was applied to analyze these qualitative data. Following an inductive approach, the researchers allowed themes to derive from the data instead of having preconceived notions about the implementation of SBA.

A program summary for each site was generated by the interviewer by transmitting quotes of the interview from the notes into a matrix ordered by each interview question. Organizing the collected data by topic or question and transferring these data into Excel were possible because of the site summaries. When the summary matrices of twelve individual sites were done, a cross-site summary matrix was produced using the data from all twelve site summaries (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each site was listed in the first column of the spreadsheet, and the data grouped by interview questions was in the remaining columns. Then, content analysis was conducted by grouping pertinent quotes into preliminarily evolved categories displaying challenges disturbing implementation across the interview questions. Then, the challenges were put into a new matrix, while exemplary quotes were contained in the cells within the matrix. When coding was complete, the evidence for each factor was reviewed, and the parameters of each identified factor were defined. Recoding was also done once any coding discrepancies were identified. Majority of the time, we agreed on the preliminary coding, and for the remaining cases, we reached an agreement through discussion based on the review of preliminary interview data. Other members of the team who took part in the collection of data then provided feedback on results.

Results

Practicing SBA in schools

During the FGDs with students, it has been found that they are familiar with the term, SBA, and they know that 30% marks are allocated for SBA (i.e., formative assessment).

But they are not quite familiar with the six components based on which 30% marks should be given. While some of them have no idea about these components at all, others have provided a wide range of components which fail to match the six components (i.e., class test, class work, home work, group work, assignment, and oral presentation) mentioned in the *Teachers’ Guide* (NCTB, 2006). One group of students, however, has informed that they have to sit for a class test every month. Results of these class tests were counted as SBA marks.

Data from teacher interviews show that teachers allocate 30% marks for SBA as per the direction of the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) and Ministry of Education. But they do not have a clear and comprehensive idea about the SBA system although several years have gone since its inception (in 2007). One of the teachers confessed,

We do not follow SBA in our school. I did not get any training on it either. My idea is not clear about that (Teacher Interview-TI-5).

Another teacher says,

We only need writing and reading [he indicates only reading and writing skills are tested in the public examination], who has spoken well in the class, has got no value. There is SBA but it is an ‘eye-wash’ (TI-2).

In response to the question, “how do you divide these marks (30% SBA marks) for different components of SBA?” teachers have mentioned, similar to their students, dozens of components for SBA whereas it has only six fixed components as mentioned in the *Teachers’ Guide* (NCTB, 2006). The following table shows the six components and a range of different components mentioned by different teachers and students (Table 2).

During interviews when they have been informed about the six components of SBA mentioned in the *Teachers’ Guide* (2006), they confessed that they provided 30% marks for SBA but they did not actually follow the division of marks for the components. They, however, mentioned that they tried to assess students based on the components.

Table 2 Components of SBA

Components mentioned in <i>Teachers’ Guide</i> (2006)	Components mentioned by teachers	Components mentioned by students
1. Class test,	1. Home tasks	1. Home tasks
2. Class work,	2. Maintaining cleanliness	2. Maintaining cleanliness
3. Home work,	3. Maintaining discipline	3. Maintaining discipline
4. Group work,	4. Maintaining good behavior	4. Maintaining dress code
5. Assignment,	5. Attendance in class	5. Maintaining good behavior
6. Oral presentation	6. Class work	6. Attendance in class
<i>[N.B. Each component bears 5 marks. Thus, 5 × 6 = 30 marks]</i>	7. Group work	7. Attendance in assembly
	8. Class performance	8. Handwriting
	9. Attentiveness in the class	9. Learning
	10. Class test	10. Class work
	11. Preparing daily lessons	11. Class performance
	12. Assignment	12. Attentiveness in the class
	13. Presentation	13. Class test
		14. Preparing daily lessons
		15. Obeying teachers
		16. Presentation

The findings of the current study show how these components are practiced by these teachers (Table 3).

The findings of the study show that although most schools involved their students in class tests, class works, group works, home works, and oral presentation, it was not done in the way it was supposed to be done. Especially class works, group works, home works, and oral presentation were not practiced and considered a part of formative assessment. Rather, they were done casually in the sense that they did these as routine tasks/activities in the classroom and these tasks went unrecorded and unmarked. Consequently, although students had to sit for class tests weekly/monthly, had to do class work, had to be engaged in group works, and had to submit home works, these hardly took the form of SBA as it has been mentioned in *Teachers' Guide* (2006) and hardly played any role in identifying the weakness of the students, giving them remedial measures to overcome the weaknesses, and eventually improve their learning and achievement.

As teachers did not practice SBA according to the instructions given in the *Teachers' Guide* (2006) and did not record marks for class work, home work, group work, assignment, and oral presentation, they had been asked how marks were given in SBA. In addition, their grade sheets had been consulted. These data show that different teachers adopted different strategies for giving marks in SBA. Some teachers treated class tests as SBA and, eventually, they recorded the marks of these tests as marks for SBA. Some other teachers gave more or less average marks to all students in SBA. On the other hand, another group of teachers gave proportional marks in SBA considering individual students' marks in term final examinations. The following table shows how the twelve teachers give marks of SBA (Table 4).

From the table, we see that most teachers (50%) give average marks in SBA to all students, while others (33.3%) give proportional marks to individual students based on his/her marks in terminal examinations. Another notable point is that the majority of the teachers (83%) intentionally give more marks to weak students to ensure a passing grade, and to some preferred students to increase their grade as shared by some students during FGDs. Some of them (16.7%), on the other hand, count monthly/weekly class tests' marks as SBA marks. One teacher shared,

There are three terminal exams in our school. Besides, we take some subject-wise model tests in monthly basis. The monthly exam is treated as SBA. (TI-4)

Table 3 Picture of teachers' practice of different components of SBA

Components	No. of teachers practicing	Frequency of practicing	Frequency mentioned in Revised Announcement from Ministry of Education	Marks recorded in the Register
Class tests	12	2–4/term	2	Yes
Class works	12	Almost everyday	1	No
Group works	12	Almost everyday	3	No
Home works	12	Twice/week	2	No
Assignment	1	Twice/term	1	Yes
Oral presentation	0	0	3	N/A

Table 4 Strategies adopted in giving marks of SBA by teachers

Teacher	Averagely	Proportionately	To give passing grade/ increasing grade	Class tests' marks as SBA
1	Yes		Yes	
2	Yes		Yes	
3		Yes	Yes	
4	Yes		Yes	
5		Yes	Yes	
6				Yes
7	Yes		Yes	
8	Yes		Yes	
9		Yes	Yes	
10	Yes		Yes	
11				Yes
12		Yes	Yes	

Most teachers apply another malpractice in this regard. They are found to give more marks in SBA to help poor students earn a passing grade and to some others to increase their grades.

Teachers usually give pass marks in SBA without thinking. Actually, the teachers are not aware of the importance of SBA. ... If the students cannot perform well, then the teachers give more marks in SBA, so that the students can pass in the terminal examinations. So, in the remote schools like ours, SBA is not so effective. (Head Teacher Interview-HTI-6)

Grade sheets of some other teachers show that they give abundance of marks in SBA to all students. A grade sheet of four students of a particular English teacher studied reads like this (Table 5).

In response to a similar question on teacher’s providing marks on SBA, students provided some more information where they mentioned that teachers preferred to provide good marks (on SBA) to those students who attend private tuition to them.

Similarly, the majority of the head teachers are fishy about the honesty of teachers. They think that there is a great chance of corruption in SBA marking.

Without any doubt, SBA is good. It should be included in JSC or SSC. But as in SBA there are some marks in teacher’s hand, it has a chance of corruption. But it would be better to include it with the final exam. (HTI-1)

This finding conforms to what had been reported by ADB (2015). It reported that “There are widespread concerns that the educational context is not suitable for this more subjective form of student assessment. Students and families have raised concerns that teachers could manipulate students’ marks to fit their own advantage” (p. 20).

Table 5 Abundance of marks given in SBA (source: field notes)

Name of students	Name of examinations	Marks in term finals (out of 70)	Marks in SBA (out of 30)	Total (100)
A	1st term exam	25	30	55
	2nd term exam	55	28	83
	Final term exam	31	30	61
B	1st term exam	25	30	55
	2nd term exam	48	28	76
	Final term exam	51	30	81
C	1st term exam	15	24	39
	2nd term exam	28	28	56
	Final term exam	40	30	70
D	1st term exam	13	24	37
	2nd term exam	25	28	53
	Final term exam	40	30	70

Challenges in implementing SBA in schools

The present study discovers that SBA appears to the teachers as a “top down approach.” As a result, English teachers consider the practice of SBA “an eye-wash,” and the head teachers regard it as “official formality.”

SBA would be effective if it were included in the JSC and SSC exam. As it is not practiced, SBA is done just for showing the official formality. (TI-10)

There is SBA but it is an ‘eye-wash’ because the SBA marks is given relatively to written marks. (HTI-11)

This finding conforms with the finding of the study on the implementation of SBA in South Africa by Reyneke (2016) who comments, “In the South African system, however, SBA in English classrooms seems to amount to nothing more than regular summative testing, grading and record keeping of marks to satisfy bureaucracy and prepare candidates for high-stakes examinations” (p. 1).

Teachers think that since the traditional role of assessment in the classrooms of Bangladesh (as opposed to classroom-based assessment) had been exam preparation and the marks given in SBA bears no “reflection” in public examinations, neither teachers nor students found the importance of such practice and consequently, and hence, they hardly show interest in it.

Teachers are giving much importance on SBA but it seems less important to the students. Because there is no reflection of SBA in the certificate (public) exams like SSC, JSC etc. SBA has no value to the students when they are going to get admitted into college. (HTI-8)

The present assessment system is not appropriate for evaluating students’ learning outcome of English language. I think something more is needed. For example, in SBA some marks can be allocated to test the speaking skill of the students. As there no such allocation of marks, they do not take any preparation. (TI-9)

Lack of sufficient orientation to and training on SBA and the consequent absence of teachers' classroom assessment literacy had also been identified as barriers to the implementation of SBA in the schools. A number of teachers in the interviews informed that they received no formal training or exposure to SBA.

We do not follow SBA in our school. I did not get any training on it either. My idea is not clear about this (TI-5).

As a result, head teachers found,

Teachers usually give pass marks in SBA without thinking. Actually, the teachers are not aware of the importance of SBA. (HTI-6)

Teachers' major concern with SBA was their perception that it was the last of too many new initiatives that they had to juggle, along with their busy schedules and heavy workload. The study found that an English teacher had to teach at least 6–7 classes each day. As a result, they hardly had time to work on SBA. Head teachers shared,

Teachers are not interested to follow the SBA system as it demands more time and industry besides the regular classroom activities. (HTI-3)

SBA is creating extra pressure for the teachers. I think traditional system is better than SBA. (HTI-12)

They also pointed out that their schools have a large student population. Some of the classrooms have even as many as 93 students. In such large classes, they found it hardly possible to practice the multifaceted assessment tools.

... teachers are not interested to follow the SBA system as it demands more time and industry besides the regular classroom activities. (HTI-2)

The number of students in each section in our schools is very large. So, we can't implement the SBA. But I believe it should be followed in English. (HTI-5)

These findings conform to the findings of a feasibility study (in 2009–2010) conducted on the SBA model. This feasibility study also found this model as "too labor intensive" for classroom teachers teaching large classes having insufficient training to prepare the students etc. (ADB, 2015: 21).

Some teachers found the contents of the syllabus very big. So, they believed if they were engaged in several types of assessment all the year round, they would fail to cover the entire syllabus in the stipulated time.

The prescribed method cannot be followed as students' involvement is not so impressive and the number of lessons is too many in the book to finish them in time. (TI-12)

Head teachers were also concerned that their teachers were not adequately prepared to implement SBA under the present socio-economic condition of the teachers. As

most teachers were financially insolvent and the salary they received was insufficient, they had to engage themselves in other jobs besides teaching. So, it was hardly possible for them to provide extra time for the extra work they had to do for implementing SBA.

SBA is an effective means of assessment but because of socio-economic conditions of teachers and heavy work-load of teachers, it can be applied appropriately and effectively. (HTI-9)

As mentioned above, some participants including a number of head teachers were doubtful about the honesty and fairness in providing marks in SBA to students; they believed that those students who took private tuition to the English teachers were blessed with full/good marks in SBA by the respective teachers.

Another seamy side of SBA is that, there is a scope of doing partiality by the teachers who practice private tuitions. They may give more numbers or point to their private tuition students. (HTI-4)

... But as in SBA there are some marks in teacher's hand, it has a chance of corruption. (HTI-10)

Above all, the interview sessions with respondents indicated that there was hardly any monitoring and supervision with regard to the implementation of SBA. Monitoring in any assessment for English and all other subjects' teachers was usually conducted by head teachers. But most head teachers informed that since they remained busy with their own classes and administrative works, they could hardly monitor teachers' practice in the classrooms closely although they guided teachers in general. But considering guidance in assessment practice, in particular, was not done in the truest sense. They always instructed teachers to assess students in the class regularly, asking them oral questions. They instructed them to test students orally what had been taught in the previous class, so that teacher could be able to see the understanding of his/her students.

To be honest because of my business with administrative works and my own class it is not possible for me to guide them in this regard (about SBA). Generally, we discuss about this and others in the teachers' meetings. (HTI-7)

According to teachers and head teachers, there is no monitoring from NCTB or education boards which also thwarted them from practicing SBA.

Although we follow year-ending exam only, I think SBA is more effective. We are observing our students for five years. So, it would be more fruitful to make judgment by us. But as board authority does not monitor the implementation of SBA and do not compel us to follow SBA, we do not follow it. (HTI-8)

Discussion

The implementation of any assessment initiative at the classroom level mostly hinges on existing ideas of teachers about their everyday teaching practice and the extent to

which they consider the new assessment initiative as required and practical. Previous records for assessment initiatives display a very modest degree of implementation, partly because assessment innovators were unable to ascertain where the teachers were.

The findings of this study explored that overall teachers possess negative attitudes towards SBA. They confessed that they did not practice SBA in their schools; rather, they preferred and emphasized year-end, high-stakes examination, ignoring SBA and, hence, students were not benefited by the introduction of SBA. The study explored a number of reasons why SBA was not practiced in the schools. The findings of this study have deviations and adherences to the previous studies that reveal the contributions of the study in existing and expanding knowledge of this field.

The findings of the current study contradict with three out of the four findings of Purvin (2011) who found that (a) SBA was being practiced as planned; (b) students possessed a good understanding of the features and objectives of SBA; and (c) they believed that SBA was playing effective roles in shaping their process of learning, development of skills, and good behavior. As far as the reasons for failure to implement SBA are concerned, the findings of the current study match with her fourth finding and the findings of ADB (2015), i.e., insufficient infrastructural and manpower facilities such as inadequate classrooms, very large class sizes, teaching aids, shortage of teachers, short lesson durations, heavy workloads, and insufficient training.

Besides these, the current study explored several significant factors which stood in the way to the implementation of SBA. These were teachers' negative attitude towards SBA, no reflection of the marks of SBA in Junior School Certificate (JSC) public examination, lack of validity and reliability of SBA as the assessment tool, lack of honesty and fairness in teachers, and large contents of the syllabus.

The present study agrees with the "dubious[ness] about the credibility of SBA" that Begum and Farooqui (2008; p.50) expressed at the very early year of the inception of SBA (2007) in Bangladeshi schools. Similar to the findings of several studies conducted in other countries such as Arrafii and Sumarni (2018), Sidhu et al. (2018), Ong (2010), Berry (2011), Omorogiuwa and Aibangbee (2017), Byabato and Kisamo (2014), Maile (2013), Kanjee and Sayed (2013), Reyneke (2016), and Arumugham (2020), teachers of Bangladeshi schools are not quite familiar with the present assessment system, especially with SBA as a means of alternative and continuous assessment, due to lack of training and monitoring. Therefore, it is not surprising, although unexpected that they cannot realize the importance and utility of SBA and, hence, cannot reap the benefits of it by employing a variety of assessment strategies to capture varied learning and providing effective feedback to students which has been prescribed by NCTB (2006). Hence, students were not benefited by SBA in Bangladesh as it was also found in a South African SBA study conducted by Dube-Xaba and Xulu (2020). When teachers do not have a clear and comprehensive understanding of what they are doing, they will surely fail to achieve the goals set by the policy makers (Arumugham, 2020).

Similar to the finding of the study by Arumugham (2020), this study found that teachers preferred and put more emphasis on year-end, high-stakes examination, ignoring SBA. It was also found that they used "oral questioning to students" as the most common form of assessment, although they occasionally also allowed students to write down answers to the questions and then read out selected few, engaged students in group works, class works, etc. Such assessment practice cannot provide teachers with

the opportunity of assessing the development of students' language skills. This type of assessment practice, which ignores the idea of diagnosing students' weakness, is often unproductive.

The current study, however, has also explored the reasons behind failure in implementing SBA in their English classrooms. These are teachers' negative attitude towards SBA, their heavy workloads, large student population, large contents of syllabus, no reflection of the marks of SBA in public examinations, lack of honesty and fairness in teachers, lack of validity and reliability of SBA as an assessment, poor socio-economic conditions of teachers, and absence of monitoring and supervision by the concerned authority like NCTB, education boards, etc.

Conclusion

This study explored the recent situation of implementing SBA, respondents' (teachers' and students') attitudes towards SBA, and the challenges that teachers of Bangladesh faced in implementing school-based assessment. The key findings reveal that the absence of reflection of the marks of SBA in public examinations, teachers' insufficient orientation towards SBA, their negative attitude, lack of validity and reliability of SBA as an assessment tool, teachers' lack of honesty and fairness, their poor socio-economic conditions of teachers, their heavy workloads, large student population, large contents of syllabus, and absence of monitoring and supervision by concerned authorities were the barriers which impeded the successful implementation of this formative assessment approach. Against a contextual backdrop where a tension between the means of earning the livelihood and honesty (on teachers' part) exists, implementing alternative assessment approaches such as SBA becomes more challenging. There appears to be an inherent incongruity in the aims of the policy which was likely to hinder the effective implementation of SBA. Further research around these tensions is needed as is more research and professional development on how learner-centered assessment strategies can be implemented in developing countries.

Implications and recommendations

The study carries certain implications for the decision-makers; designers of curricula, assessment, and testing; teachers; and teacher trainers involved in the Bangladeshi educational system and elsewhere. The findings of the study lead to some suggestions on what could be done to make formative assessment practice happen. In order to minimize the challenges to implement new assessment initiatives at the classroom level, it is needed to employ strategies that are contextually suitable and practical (Ahmmed & Mullick, 2014).

To make this assessment system happen in the schools, teachers' current beliefs and understanding in terms of formative assessment need to be challenged and they should be provided with opportunities to come to terms with the principles and philosophy of the assessment scheme. Above all, the teachers themselves ought to embrace the learning process (Arumugham, 2020). Steps need to be taken to extensively orient teachers to SBA and its importance and bring about change in their perception through teachers' professional training and development (Ong, 2010; Sidhu et al., 2011). At the same time, it should be ensured that curriculum and assessment specialists from NCTB and district education office and school top management especially the school head

teachers, assistant head teachers, and senior assistant teachers should be involved in monitoring, supervising, and assisting teachers with regard to the implementation of SBA. The final grade in English should include both the marks of SBA (30%) and JSC examination (70%), where a reflection of the marks of SBA in Junior School Certificate (JSC) public examination can be ensured and, hence, both teachers and students will feel motivated to practice SBA. Moreover, the contents of the syllabus require revision and abridgement so that the entire syllabus could be touched in one academic year.

Besides, it is perhaps high time to consider the tremendous workload a teacher has to undertake. So, a reduction in workload and a section-wise decrease in the number of student enrolment may be steps in the right direction. Regarding the increase in paper and administrative work such as filling in forms, cards, and report books, a large majority of the respondents felt schools should be provided with more office personnel to help reduce their workload. Above all, to help teachers be financially sound and concentrate solely on their profession, a handsome pay-scale must be introduced so that they do not need to worry about their day-to-day expenses. Thus, the effective implementation of this formative assessment scheme “depend[s] on proper management of resources and manpower” (Begum & Farooqui, 2008: 50).

Limitation and future researches

The most important limitation of the study is the sample size and geographical areas and locations of the study. Since it is a qualitative study, the sample size of the study is limited. Hence, it is hard to term these samples as representative of all the schools of Bangladesh. However, the homogeneity and centralization of the school system in Bangladesh (Hossain & Tavakoli, 2008; Rahman et al., 2021) specify that even if the findings are specific to the particular research contexts, other schools were undeniably likely to be facing the same phenomena. Moreover, to make the samples as representative of the population, schools from both urban and rural areas were selected. Notwithstanding its limitations, this study is one of only very few studies that report issues related to the implementation of SBA at secondary schools in Bangladesh. However, further large-scale studies employing multi-methods research design with a greater number of respondents including parents and administrators are required to be conducted in the secondary schools of Bangladesh so that a more insightful understanding can be gained.

Abbreviations

SBA: School-based assessment; FA: Formative assessment; SA: Summative assessment; AoL: Assessment of learning; AfL: Assessment for learning; TBA: Teacher-based assessment; SESIP: Secondary education sector improvement project; FGDs: Focus group discussions; NCTB: National curriculum and textbook board; JSC: Junior school certificate

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Authors' contributions

All authors had equal contribution in the process of the paper. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

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Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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