

REVIEW

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# Test review of the English public examination at the secondary level in Bangladesh

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## Abstract

This paper reviews the most important public English examination (matriculation exam) that students take at the end of their secondary education in Bangladesh. The examination is known as the Secondary School Certificate (SSC), which is taken at the end of Grade 10 in the mainstream education in the country. The score of SSC English examination is used as the gatekeeper at the higher secondary (2 years of higher secondary education after matriculation and before tertiary education) and university admission tests. Even though the significance of this English examination is huge from Bangladeshi social, cultural, or economic perspectives, it is highly criticized by the stakeholders and academicians alike. The exam is alleged to fall short to measure the communicative English proficiency of the test users. Accordingly, the reliability of the exam is questionable. However, there is almost no publication or academic paper evaluating the characteristics of the examination which could expand our understanding of the existing problems related to the test. Hence, this review of the SSC English examination examines and describes the features of the examination as it is used in the context from a scholarly point of view, which would constructively pave the way for future researchers.

**Keywords:** Public examination, Secondary education, English language testing

## Introduction

The language planning of Bangladesh includes the teaching of English as a compulsory subject of the curriculum; English is introduced here at the primary level, and its inclusion continues till the tertiary level of education. The *National Curriculum* (2012) considers English as the vehicle of reaching the 'Digital Bangladesh 2021' goal of the government as English is the language of science, technology, and globalization. The *National Curriculum Policy* (2012) and the Ministry of Education (2010) give equal importance to teaching and learning of English along with Bangla (the national language of Bangladesh). The importance of English in the curriculum thus goes beyond considering this only as one of the subjects taught at schools, as noted in the *National Curriculum*, (2012) that the English language can help contribute to the areas of national development, such as "to achieve developments in science, technology, higher education, business, industry and particularly in communications and IT skills" (p. 73). Similarly, the English examination at the secondary level, which is known as the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination also carries

immense importance in the educational system of Bangladesh. The score of the SSC English examination paper is used as a decider for students at the same score points for the admission to the higher secondary level (Secondary and Higher Secondary Division, 2018). If there is a dip in the SSC results in any of the years, it happens because of the lower passing rate especially in the English examination.

Considering the importance of teaching English, many curriculum reforms took place targeting the improvement of English teaching and learning scenario in Bangladesh. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)-based curriculum was introduced at the secondary level of education in 1996 with a desire to bring positive changes in English language teaching and learning. Later in 2001, the first CLT-based SSC English examination took place countrywide. Regarding this, it should be noted that public examination or high stakes examinations have commonly been used to implement the curriculum in many other countries too (Cheng, 1998, 2002, 2005). But “the nature of high-stakes-test-induced curricular control is highly dependent on the structures of the tests themselves” (Au, 2007, p. 258). So, it is necessary to examine the examination itself to understand if it is adequate to serve the purpose. However, no scholarly research article has been published so far aiming at examining the SSC English examination from a scholarly standpoint. The primary aim of this article, henceforth, is to review the characteristics of the SSC English examination from a critical perspective and describe them as it is from scholarly perspectives.

### **Background of the SSC examination**

The education system in Bangladesh is based on a 3-tiered system: primary, secondary and higher secondary. Primary education is a 5-year cycle while secondary education is a 7-year one with three sub-stages: 3 years of junior secondary, 2 years of secondary, and 2 years of higher secondary. Secondary education is the biggest schooling stage in the educational structure in Bangladesh (Begum and Farooqui, 2008), which has been identified as one of the priority areas in 2017/18 budget (Centre for Policy Dialogue, 2017). Students sit for the most important school leaving public examination at the end of grade 10, which is known as the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination. This is a 2 years program comprises of grades 9 and 10. Students study English as one of the compulsory subjects at the SSC level. Among all the examinations, English is considered the most important and tough to pass. In 2016, approximately 1.30 million; in 2017, over 1.78 million; and in 2018, over two million students sat for the examination, which demonstrates the increasing number of students taking this SSC examination. The examination is an achievement test in nature and takes place only once in a year. Usually, the examination takes place in the first 3 months of the year and examination board schedules the time and place. Students who fail or miss the examination will have to wait for 1 year to retake the examination.

Results of the SSC examination are now extensively used in making high-stakes decisions in academic as well as professional contexts. Also, in the social context of Bangladesh, SSC is regarded as one of the most prestigious examinations due to its long history in the education system and culture as the first terminal school leaving examination. When the SSC results are published, they make the page one news in the country. Thus, SSC, directly and indirectly, influences students' study and life chances. Failure or low scores in this examination prevent the students from getting into their desired academic institutions, obtaining academic degrees or even entering professions they are prepared for. Ilon (2000) reported

that a graduate with this certificate could earn 223% higher than others without this certification. The importance of this level of education is recognized in the 2017/18 government budget by allocating US\$18.2 billion to develop secondary education.

The next section describes the English examination at the SSC level, which is the primary focus of the article.

## **Description of the SSC English examination**

### **Purpose and use of the English examination**

According to the *National Curriculum* (2012), the SSC English examination assesses the creativity of the students that how far they can use English in their context. However, nothing is stated explicitly about the purpose of the examination. Even the English syllabus also emphasizes the importance of the context. This is an achievement test which is designed to measure the mastery of the learners on the materials taught in the class and reflect the goals of the learning objectives (Grabowski and Dakin, 2014). So, the primary purpose of the SSC English examination is to assess the contextual knowledge of the learners. However, the broader vision of the examination is to assess “learners’ different skills- cognitive, comprehension, application, and higher skills,” (*National Curriculum*, 2012, p. 26). Students have to pass this SSC examination to study next 2 years at the higher secondary level, (Khan, 2010). Scores from this SSC examination is one of the critical decisive factors for further undergraduate admission tests at the tertiary level.

### **Specifics of the examination**

English at the SSC level is a 200 marks examination, which is divided into two parts, each consists of 100 marks (see [Appendix](#)). These two parts are known as *English first paper* and *English second paper*. This large-scale public examination is administered by eight education boards located in Dhaka, Chittagong, Comilla, Jessore, Rajshahi, Barisal, Sylhet, and Dinajpur. One standard set of question papers is administered by eight boards together, at the same time, on the same day. These two examinations take place on two different days- usually one after another. Since this is a paper-pencil-based examination, test takers are required to be physically present at the test venues selected by the examination board. This is a 3-h examination and there is no break time while writing the test. All instructions are given in English. The examination guidelines published by the National Textbook and Curriculum Board (NCTB) of Bangladesh state that test designers are not allowed to use any materials used in the textbook, *English For Today* or any other commercially published materials; question setters have to set the questions by themselves. It is to be noted that the test is written by the experienced teachers selected by the examination board from various schools across the country.

The English first paper (see [Appendix](#)) consists of two sections: reading (50 marks) and writing (50 marks). Reading section contains test items such as MCQ, answering questions based on passages, matching, gap filling, information transfer, rearranging, and summarizing. On the other hand, writing section contains test items such as writing a paragraph, completing a story, writing informal letters, describing graphs, and dialog writing. The English second paper (see [Appendix](#)) has two sections: grammar (45 marks) and composition (55 marks). Grammar section consists of test items such as gap filling with and without clues, substitution table, right forms of verbs, narrative style, changing

sentences, completing sentences, use of suffix and prefix, tag questions, sentence connectors, and punctuation. Alternatively, the composition part contains test items such as writing a CV, writing formal letters/emails, paragraphs, and writing compositions. The SSC English examination, therefore, tests only two skills: reading and writing.

### **Analysis of the English public examination**

The present section analyses the SSC English examination according to the guiding principles of good assessments suggested by Coombe, Folse, and Hubley (2007), which are also known as the cornerstones of testing.

#### **Validity and reliability**

The definition of validity is still the same as it was given by Lado (1961) in a classic volume, “Does a test measure what it is supposed to measure? If it does, it is valid” (p. 321). It is crucial for an examination be valid for its results to be considered, understood, and applied accurately. To this end, the SSC English examination does not have construct validity as there is a wide gap between the “intended to be taught and what is measured” (Das, Shaheen, Shrestha, Rahman and Khan, 2014, p. 330). The speaking and listening skills are never tested in reality in the SSC English examination. The CLT-based *National Curriculum* (2012), however, stresses the importance of teaching and testing of all four language skills; in the public examination only reading and writing are tested. The examination lacks content validity too, as some of the items demand memorization or knowledge of forms over communicative skills. For example, in the first paper English examination held in 2018, the first reading passage was directly taken from the prescribed textbook, which was against the recommendation of the English curriculum; students did not have to read the passage to answer the questions. In the second paper, nearly half of the total marks (45 out of 100) have been allocated for grammar, which is at all not communicative in nature. In this regard, Khan (2010) commented that since the SSC English examination is unable to achieve the communicative goal of the curriculum, it does not meet the requirements of validity.

The constant up and down of the test results prove the SSC English examination unreliable too. The 80.40% passing rate of Comilla board (one of the examination boards) in 2018 SSC examination from 59.03% in 2017 exemplifies the concern (Billah, 2018). Further, in the most recent result of SSC examination in 2018, there was a dip by 7.49% points from last year because many students did not pass in the English subject (Habib, 2018). There is a constant fluctuation in the results of the English examination. Further, the quality control measures taken in marking the scripts are also doubtful. The information about the procedures for recruiting markers, if the markers are trained or not, are not available to the general test users to refer. As a result, the reliability of the SSC English examination is questionable.

#### **Usefulness and authenticity**

The most essential quality of a test is its usefulness, for which a test is designed and delivered (Bachman and Palmer, 1996). According to the *National Curriculum* (2012), the SSC English examination is supposed to examine the communicative ability of the test takers—if the test takers can use English in their real life. As the most two necessary skills, such as speaking and listening, are not tested, the examination already cannot

measure the communicative ability of the students. Further, the results obtained from the test are somewhat questionable. For example, in the admission year of 2014/15 (SSC result has contribution in the selection process), only two students were qualified to be admitted in the English department at the University of Dhaka (Habib and Chakraborty, 2014); students having the high scores in their previous public examinations could not even pass the admission test. So, the test fails to fit in the purpose also.

From the authenticity point of view, the test items should include real-life texts, as suggested by Morrow (2012) to use real-world tasks in CLT-based English tests. After analyzing the question papers, Das et al. (2014) concluded that the test items were not communicative and some of them were set based on knowledge of form. For example, in the second paper, there is a test item asking to change the form of the sentences. Independent context-free sentences are given with directions. This item is not authentic because language is never used in vacuum. Moreover, listening and speaking are not assessed. So, the English public examination is unable to address the issue of authenticity also.

### **Washback**

Washback is known as the influence of testing on teaching and learning (Alderson and Wall, 1993). In the *National Curriculum* (2012) document, there is no explicit mention of any intended washback effect; however, the change of the examination syllabus is a top-down intended washback on English language teaching and learning in Bangladesh. Almost 20 years back, while researching in the context of examination change in Hong Kong, Cheng (1997a, b) too noticed the same pattern that how implementing the public examination served as an intended purpose to bring washback effect in teaching and learning, even if it might not be explicitly mentioned in the various public documents. While designing the CLT framework, leading advocates of this approach (Canale and Swain, 1980; Green, 1985; Hart, Lapkin and Swain, 1987; Swain, 1984) suggested to work for washback, that is, communicative tests should explicitly be designed to bring positive washback. Bailey (1996) further stressed that bringing positive washback should be the primary goal for the CLT-based test design. The function of a CLT-based examination is to enhance a communicative teaching and learning environment, which will enable the learners to use English in their regular life. However, in Bangladesh, apparently, it did not happen. English language teaching always has been a challenging area in Bangladesh regardless of various attempts of curriculum reforms (Rahman and Pandian, 2018). Even if CLT-based English education being in operation in the country for nearly two decades, Hamid (2011) pointed out a recent frightening decrease of the standard of the teaching of English.

The washback effect of the SSC English examination is noted in the test preparation of the students and teachers in achieving the higher grade (Khan, 2010). Regarding this, Rahman (2007) found that memorization plays a vital role in students' success. They heavily rely on private tuition, notebooks/guidebooks, and test preparation courses. Although no large-scale washback research has been conducted so far in the context of SSC English examination in Bangladesh, seemingly, these mentioned factors do not point towards a positive washback situation, where students would experience an improved teaching and learning situation. Instead, explicit teaching towards the test and test preparation culture are noticed, which is not the original purpose of the examination.

### **Transparency and security**

Transparency means students' access to the accurate and precise information on which they are going to be tested. Such information includes the clarity about the format of the test, test timing, and grading criteria. The examination board in Bangladesh regularly publishes such information. For example, sample question papers are uploaded to the relevant ministry websites before the examination to guide the preparation of the students. Students have the information about the grading policy, and they have ideas about the test items. It can be said that SSC English examination demonstrates transparency that the students know on what they are going to be tested.

At the end of the government, a high level of security protocol is maintained during the examination. For example, no mobile phone is allowed to use within 200 m of the examination centers to assure the sanctuary of the examination. However, security has become the most significant issue and problem area in the past recent years, because question papers are being leaked almost regularly. There were numerous incidents when test-takers had the paper before the exam. We hope the government will take necessary steps to prevent such scandalous incident.

### **Strengths and weaknesses of the examination**

Most of the researchers (Haider, 2008; Khan, 2010; Rahman, 2007) claim that the general strength of the SSC English examination is that students can achieve the higher level of grade and students can pass the public examination easily. This is echoed in the overall passing rate of previous years, that is, 88.29% in 2015, 88.70% in 2016 (Bangladesh Bureau of Educational Information and Statistics (BANBEIS), 2014), 80.35% in 2017 and 77.77% in 2018. However, this brings the issue of inflated test scores (Shepard, 1990), in which the students are getting higher scores without the actual ability to produce the language. Even though there is a higher passing rate, scholars (Billah, 2018; Hamid, 2011) pointed out the decreasing standard of English language teaching and learning in the recent years. From the academic point of view, the biggest flaw in the SSC English examination lies in its misalignment with the prescribed CLT-based curriculum in the country. Since the exam has failed to correspond with the curriculum, by default the classroom instruction is aligned with the examination. Thus, the classroom teaching and learning are exam oriented and fail to address the communicative need of English language teaching and learning.

### **Review and Conclusions**

The 2014 study of Das et al. explored an overall dissatisfaction towards the SSC English examination by most of the stakeholders of the test. Even though there is a high passing rate, stakeholders know that the English public examination at the SSC fails to address the need for English language teaching and learning. The way the examination is set, it is only helpful in getting the high score but ineffective in measuring the communicative purpose of the English language teaching or students' English proficiency in general. The overall analysis of the SSC English examination raises a question if the context and education structure of this country is enough to implement a CLT-based English examination at such a big panorama. Further, the SSC English public examination does not have a published test specification

stating the purpose, uses or guidelines as well; the examination board should publish a test mandate to clarify the details of the examination to the test takers. Having a detailed test guideline would justify the examination to some extent. Even though the SSC English examination garners colossal public as well as scholarly criticisms, little academic research has been conducted on this examination. Considering the importance of this examination in the context of Bangladesh, rigorous academic research should be carried out on the various aspects of the SSC English examination to suggest how this examination could be improved.

### Appendix

**Table 1** Mark distribution and structure of SSC English examination

Papers	Total marks	Skills marks	Test items	No. of items	Scores for items	
English first paper	100	Reading 50	Questions from unseen passage-I			
			• MCQ	7	7	
			• Answering open ended questions	5	10	
			Questions from unseen passage II			
			• Information transfer	5	5	
			• Gap filling without clues	5	5	
			• Summary	1	10	
		Other questions (not based on any passage)				
		• Matching	5	5		
		• Rearranging- order to make a story	1	8		
		Writing 50	• Writing paragraphs (clues are given to compose the paragraph)	1	10	
			• Completing a story	1	10	
			• Writing informal letters	1	10	
			• Describing graphs/charts	1	10	
• Dialog writing	1		10			
English second paper	100		Grammar 45	• Gap filling with clues	5	5
				• Gap filling without clues	5	5
		• Substitution table		5	5	
		• Right forms of verbs		5	5	
		• Narration		5	5	
		• Changing sentences		10	10	
		• Completing sentences		5	5	
• Use of suffix and prefix	5	5				
• Tag question	5	5				
• Sentence connectors	5	5				

**Table 1** Mark distribution and structure of SSC English examination (*Continued*)

Papers	Total marks	Skills marks	Test items	No. of items	Scores for items
		Composition 55	Group A (any two items will be given in the question paper)	2	20
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Writing CV with cover letter</li> <li>• Formal/informal letters/e-mails</li> </ul>		
			Group B (any two items will be given in the question paper)	2	20
			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completing stories</li> <li>• Short paragraphs</li> <li>• Dialogs writing</li> <li>• Analyzing graphs and charts</li> </ul>		
			Group C		
			• Composition based on personal experience, everyday problems, events, incidents, etc.	1	15

**Abbreviations**

CLT: Communicative Language Teaching; GTM: Grammar Translation Method; SSC: Secondary School Certificate

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The whole review has been written by the author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

**Competing interests**

The author declares that he/she has no competing interests.

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