

# Essay Writing Activities in Class: Bangladeshi Undergraduates' Perspectives

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## OPEN ACCESS

Manuscript ID:  
ENG-2020-08043340

Volume: 8

Issue: 4

Month: September

Year: 2020

P-ISSN: 2320-2645

E-ISSN: 2582-3531

Received: 28.06.2020

Accepted: 29.07.2020

Published: 01.09.2020

Citation:

Suchona, Iffat Jahan. "Essay Writing Activities in Class: Bangladeshi Undergraduates' Perspectives." *Shanlax International Journal of English*, vol. 8, no. 4, 2020, pp. 16–24.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/english.v8i4.3340>



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## Abstract

*Although smart writing skill is equally important in both academic and professional spheres, many Bangladeshi tertiary level learners find writing skills too difficult to be developed. In respect of this, the students are given many writing tasks (such as composing a five-paragraph essay) to improve their competencies in a language classroom. Anyhow, writing a good essay needs several cognitive steps that a student has to go through demanding a high level of motivation and constructive teacher feedback. Considering the fact, this paper has investigated tertiary level Bangladeshi learners' perspectives about how the essay-writing tasks keep them motivated in class. This pilot project had been conducted using a set of 20 items (quantitative survey questionnaire), which was administered among thirty participants from the Department of English of a reputed Bangladeshi public university. The small-scale research revealed that the majority of the undergraduates stay motivated during the brainstorming part of essay writing tasks. However, many of them find the patterns of essays quite confusing. However, these learners believe more writing assignments, along with effective teacher feedback, can highly encourage them to develop their writing skills.*

**Keywords: Motivation, Writing, Essays, Brainstorming and Feedback**

## Introduction

In every educational discipline, writing skill is an essential component for a student. According to Hidi & Boscolo (2007), the learners' capability to write constructively determines their academic performance across the curriculum (p.143). Besides, many professional sectors today need people with smart and efficient writing skills. However, writing is an ability that needs a sufficient amount of motivation, practice, and effort on the part of a writer. According to Flower & Hayes (1981), writing incorporates stages like the power of reminiscence, setting objectives, planning, limitation finding, and proper analysis (p.370). The quantity and complexness of those steps require a learner's high level of motivation and practice

Hence, successful and constructive writing skills are of paramount importance within the sectors of higher education and career development. Geiser & Studley (2001) pointed out that a learner's ability to produce texts constructively is one of the determiners of success during the first year. Thus, analytical writing abilities are crucial for a learner to attain good grades within academic life as well as within the realm of profession. Payne (2012) mentioned that some students lack good writing skills that make them lag in both these spheres because, to them, writing is a complex and fearful task.

Therefore, a good piece of writing needs a great deal of motivation. However, writing essays and motivation are two different aspects of language learning and teaching. This paper has tried to create a link between these two terms from the viewpoints of the Bangladeshi undergraduates.

Many language researchers believe that motivation can affect learning outcomes greatly (Gardner, 1972; Wigfield & Wentzel, 2007, Bernard, 2010, cited in Khodabakhshzadeh et al. 2017). Dörnyei (1994a) pointed out that in second/foreign language learning procedure, motivation is an influential element to consider (p.273). Hence, to what degree the language learners are motivated during the writing tasks in a classroom needs a proper investigation.

Students from the English Department of a well-known Bangladeshi public university were selected for this pilot study because of their familiarities with essay writing activities in and out of the classroom. Essays (narrative, descriptive, expository, persuasive, argumentative, compare/contrast, and cause/effect) have some certain steps and patterns that the students need to follow during composition. The patterns are well-taught in the classroom, but this is where some students face complexities and make errors in writing. They get very confused regarding the types and structures of essays. Writing a good five-paragraph essay has stages like brainstorming, outlining, organizing, editing, and reviewing that a student has to go through. During these stages, a student might lose their motivation and become unsuccessful in creating a good piece of writing, in the four year B. A (Honours) program (in the selected university), there are eight semesters (two semesters a year), and writing courses start from the first year first semester. In the second semester, the writing types and strategies of essays are taught to the learners within a course since some students from the non-English medium background are not aware of these phases enough. Hence, his particular course aims to develop the learners' writing abilities in understanding and writing different kinds of essays and assignments by promoting autonomy and confidence. However, it has been observed that some students still cannot produce a good piece of essay in the semester's final examination (Rahman & Hasan, 2019). The chances are that these learners may not be properly motivated in the writing classroom. It is also possible that these students, being non-English mediums background, cannot keep up with the newly taught writing strategies and patterns of essays. Additionally, these learners sometimes show greater

anxiety regarding writing, and often they cannot even decide how to start the essay. In this regard, teacher-feedback can be of great help to boost the students' motivation in writing essays effectively.

### **The Rationale of the Study**

Plenty of researches has been conducted on motivation and language learning. Several language instructors have attempted to figure out different ways to motivate their students in a writing classroom. However, it has been noticed that how the motivation works through writing tasks in the Bangladeshi context has not been addressed much, let alone from the perspectives of the learners. Researches have been done in a Bangladeshi context only to see if the students are motivated in writing as a whole and how the brainstorming step of an essay creates motivation among the learners. Some studies have revealed that students try to stay motivated in an essay writing classroom only when the topics are engaging and course-related, and if the teacher feedback is good enough to follow. Hence, the researcher of this paper has attempted to find out through a pilot study whether the students believe that they are truly motivated through the essay writing tasks in a classroom. Whether the teacher feedback has any impact on the learners or not, has also been addressed here.

### **Literature Review**

To develop an effective writing style, the students must be highly motivated, especially in a classroom environment. According to Gardner (2001, cited in Bernard, 2010, p.4), motivation is all about effort, desire, and positive affect. Concerning this, it can be said that if the students put a great deal of effort into writing, if they want to pursue their goal through constructive writing and if they want to enjoy it when they are writing essays in the classroom, the outcome will be remarkable.

Kellogg (2008, p.2) believes that writing is not something that a person is born with; rather, it is an expertise that gets improved as time goes by. However, learners cope with anxiety, motivation, and other purposeful writing activities to develop their writing expertise. Certainly, a specific amount of anxiety can create barriers for many learners in this

regard. Daly & Hailey (1984) have stated that often too much anxiety can make a learner avoid writing activities, particularly when he/she sees that his/her writing will be academically marked (cited in Payne, 2012).

The “Social Cognitive Theory,” advocated by Albert Bandura, mentions that self-efficacy is a crucial prognosticator for people’s conduct (Bandura, 1986, 1997, cited in Payne, 2012, p.4). Learners’ self-efficacy viewpoints can exhibit higher inherent enjoyment in doing a variety of challenging activities in class. Pajares (1996, cited in Payne, 2012, p.4) stated that these students display less anxiety and stress when they come across demanding language tasks. Another component, self-regulation, occurs when a learner takes control of and assesses the learning and behavior. Students who are led by intrinsic motivation can effectively use self-regulated strategies to gain academic success (Shunk & Zimmerman, 1994, cited in Payne, 2012, p.5).

Another significant element of motivation is goal orientation. Ryan & Deci’s (2000, p.55), “Self-determination Theory” talks about two fundamental sorts of objectives regarding motivation: intrinsic (inherent) and extrinsic (external). If an individual has an innate motivation, that person completes a task for internal recompense. Extrinsic motivational goals examine the instrumental worth of a task rather than just the satisfaction of the task itself. Dornyei (1994a) states that extrinsic motivational goals can make learners perform better so that they can achieve extrinsic rewards such as oral compliments and good grades in written examinations (p.275). In the Bangladeshi context, most of the students possess this extrinsic motivation (mostly good grades) even if it is in the case of essay writing activity.

A research study conducted by Kabir (2015) has shown that many Bangladeshi students possess instrumental motivation (aspiration to learn a language for some benefits and “Integrative Motivation.”

Means the desire to attain expertise) for learning English. In a language classroom, learners have to be sufficiently motivated so that they can participate in their learning activities happily. Since writing is a skill and a process through which a learner’s cognitive development occurs, motivation can play

a very important role in keeping a beginner level writer quite engaged in the writing activities. Writing essays, although a bit difficult in the beginning, can be a fun activity in class if carried out appropriately. Additionally, Mohammad & Hussain (2013) have shown in research that essay writing activity is engaging and motivating for the learners when they are involved in “guided brainstorming” (guided brainstorming is a session where the students study about a particular subject under the limitations of viewpoints and time.) at the beginning level (p.192). Their study has also revealed that proper “brainstorming” can motivate a learner easily to continue writing an entire essay, and he/she feels more organized once the brainstorming is done.

### **Research Questions**

Hence, in light of what has been discussed above, the researcher has formed the following questions,

- What are the motivations for writing essays in a language classroom?
- Do the essay patterns cause problems for the students by lowering motivation during writing? If so, then how?
- What are the nature and extent of feedbacks from the teachers that motivate the students to improve their writing skills?

### **Methodology**

#### **Participants**

The small-scale study was conducted on the freshmen from the Department of English of a Bangladeshi public university. Thirty students were selected for this pilot study, ensuring homogenous (age between 18 to 20; both male and female) sampling. Only students from beginner level were selected because the topic of the research was directly linked to their academic syllabus. The participation in the research was volitional and undisclosed. The subjects were given enough time to respond to the survey questionnaire, and they were given proper instruction on it. They were not offered any rewards in exchange for participation.

#### **Instruments**

To study how motivation works for the students in learning a language, a questionnaire comprising

20 items was developed, and a five-point Likert Scale (1932) has been employed as an instrument (1: strongly disagree, 2: disagree, 3: neutral, 4: agree and 5: strongly agree).

This questionnaire was adjusted from a questionnaire of 37 items created by Daly and Miller (1975), cited in Payne (2012). Being a pilot study, only 20 items were selected due to some mismatches and recurrences. Later on, significant modifications were made to match it with the context of the participants. The quantitative survey questionnaire had close-ended items under three groups:

- Group one: Students' level of motivation during writing essays
- Group two: Problems students faced due to

- different patterns of essays
  - Group three: Teachers' feedback that enhances motivation
- The questionnaire has been provided in the Appendix section.

### Results

The researcher worked with Microsoft excel sheet and Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24.0 to enter and analyze the data, respectively. Three tables (1, 2, and 3) display the results of the questionnaire survey data. The frequencies, percentages, and means for all the responses are demonstrated below.

**Table 1: Students' Level of Motivation during Essay Writing**

Table 1											
Item	Strongly disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Neutral (3)		Agree (4)		Strongly agree (5)		Mean
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	
1	2	6.7%	6	20.0%	5	16.7%	14	46.7%	3	10.0%	3.33
2	0	.0%	3	10.0%	6	20.0%	18	60.0%	3	10.0%	3.70
3	1	3.3%	0	.0%	1	3.3%	19	63.3%	9	30.0%	4.17
4	0	.0%	2	6.7%	4	13.3%	21	70.0%	3	10.0%	3.83
5	0	.0%	7	23.3%	8	26.7%	12	40.0%	3	10.0%	3.37
6	0	.0%	5	16.7%	6	20.0%	15	50.0%	4	13.3%	3.60
7	0	.0%	6	20.0%	13	43.3%	10	33.3%	1	3.3%	3.20
8	0	.0%	7	23.3%	7	23.3%	15	50.0%	1	3.3%	4.30
9	0	.0%	6	20.0%	6	20.0%	16	53.3%	2	6.7%	3.47
10	0	.0%	5	16.7%	9	30.0%	14	46.7%	2	6.7%	3.43

Freq\* = Frequency

In Table 1, the level of motivation among the students during writing essays is measured. The results show that some students are quite motivated during essay writing, the majority of them (70%) do brainstorming before writing essays, and most of them (60%) complete the essays even when they find it hard to finish. A substantial part of the participants (46.7%) agreed that they like writing,

and many of them believe that good writing skills would help them achieve academic goals. Spelling was easy only for several students (40% agreed), and spelling was significant in producing a good essay, which also goes with motivation. The overall mean for this section is 3.64, which proves that the level of the students' motivation was high.

**Table 2 Problems students faced due to different patterns of essays**

	Strongly disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Neutral (3)		Agree (4)		Strongly agree (5)		Mean
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	
11	0	.0%	3	10.0%	4	13.3%	16	53.3%	7	23.3%	3.90
12	0	.0%	2	6.7%	3	10.0%	19	63.3%	6	20.0%	3.97

13	1	3.3%	0	0%	3	10.0%	19	63.3%	7	23.3%	4.03
14	2	6.7%	5	16.7%	4	13.3%	15	50.0%	4	13.3%	3.47
15	3	10.0%	18	60.0%	2	6.7%	6	20.0%	1	3.3%	2.47
16	4	13.3%	6	20.0%	6	20.0%	12	40.0%	2	6.7%	3.07
17	2	6.7%	8	26.7%	7	23.3%	11	36.7%	2	6.7%	3.10

Freq\* = Frequency

Seven items from Table 2 reveal that many students (63.3%) groped for new words during the composition of essays, and they felt that the structures of their essays were not always satisfactory. The majority (53.3%) of them said that the different formats of the essays were often unclear to them. A substantial part of the participants has agreed on item 14. That is, in the case of composing a good thesis statement of an essay, they got confused and took more time. Most of them have disagreed on item 15, which reveals that the students paid more attention

to grammatical aspects during writing essays. Only 40% of the students agreed on item 16 by saying that choosing a topic on any sensitive issue made them a bit nervous. In the case of item 17, some participants agreed that they read on the topic well before writing essays, which upheld their motivation. The overall mean for these seven items is 3.43, which indicates that students' writing motivation decreased when they found themselves confused with the patterns of essays in the classroom and when they spent too much time searching for words while writing.

**Table 3: Teachers' feedback that enhances motivation**

Table 3											
Item	Strongly disagree (1)		Disagree (2)		Neutral (3)		Agree (4)		Strongly agree (5)		Mean
	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	Freq	%	
18	0	.0%	0	.0%	4	13.3%	15	50.0%	11	36.7%	4.23
19	3	10.0%	13	43.3%	5	16.7%	8	26.7%	1	3.3%	2.70
20	7	23.3%	9	30.0%	9	30.0%	3	10.0%	2	6.7%	2.47

Freq\* = Frequency

The third tables' three items show different findings. Motivation in writing essays was deeply linked to the teachers' feedback to the students. Here, a substantial part (50%) of the students felt good to get teacher feedback on writing. Only some students (26.7%) felt that negative feedback on their writing demotivated them. However, a greater part of the participants (43.3%) felt that negative feedback was part of the learning, and it did not demoralize them at all. Along with these, in the case of item 20, only a few students (10%) admitted that they felt happy to have several writing assignments on essays, whereas some students have disagreed on this item, and some have remained in neutral positions. Some of them (23.3%) have strongly disagreed on the final item, saying they do not feel happy at all when the teacher gives them a handful of writing tasks. The overall mean for this table is 3.13, which indicates negative teacher feedback, and too many written assignments

often created difficulties for some students, which gradually made them lose their motivation. The questionnaire, despite being designed for a pilot-study, had good content validity and internal consistency.

### Discussions of the Results

The data drawn from the analyses show that most of the students were quite motivated in essay writing classroom,s which can be deemed as a positive outcome. These learners went through "brainstorming and prewriting" before composing an essay properly and subsequently attempted to finish writing the essay no matter how tough it seemed. This reveals that several students took self-regulated strategies, which meant that they liked taking on challenging tasks to attain success in educational sectors. The highest score (70%) in Table 1 was for item 4 (I always brainstorm before

writing essays), which meant that students gave a lot of effort before writing essays. Isaksen (1998) stated how “brainstorming is one of the most well-known tools for effective thinking.” And the fact that these students did brainstorming to generate new ideas before writing motivated them to keep up with their writing activities. For item no. 1 (I enjoy writing), many students (46.7%) acknowledged that they like writing while some of them (20%) did not. Moreover, in item no 6 (I practice my writing to improve my skills) and 9 (I put a lot of effort into my writing), majority of the participants (53%) agreed on these statements which disclosed that these students were driven writers in a classroom as they spare no effort in gaining the best outcome. Hence, Table-1 shows that these first-year learners were very motivated to write essays, as many of them believed that good writing abilities would help them achieve their goals in the future.

The idea of writing an essay was not new to these learners in the English Department of the selected university for this pilot project. However, the way they were taught to write essays in their twelve-year education before getting admission into the university was not completely appropriate. In Table-2, it has been noticed that in the 1st year, different patterns of the essays baffled some learners, and most of them got confused when they tried to formulate appropriate thesis statements. This problem occurred because of their non-English background before getting into the university as in most of the Bangladeshi schools and colleges (non-English background), essays are taught using the product approach instead of the process approach. Moreover, several kinds of essays initiate various problems among some students when they were in the steps of planning and organizing because this was where they searched for new and advanced words.

Additionally, it was observed that the students were concerned about grammatical and spelling errors when they are engaged in writing essays. If a student constantly worries about these factors, he/she may not be able to produce a good essay from scratch. This anxiety led them towards this feeling that their writing would not yield them good marks. Many of them became demotivated due to this constant apprehension.

It is beyond question that teacher feedback has an immense impact on developing the students’ writing capabilities (Chen, 2009, p.162). As Table 3 suggests, most of the participants seemed content when the teachers gave them feedback on their essays. These learners seemed to have extrinsic motivation for writing. Mostly, positive feedback from the teacher motivated these students to improve their writing skills. Negative feedback created problems for some learners, which makes them lose motivation. This might be a reason for their disliking getting more written assignments from the teachers as more assignments meant more feedbacks. The good thing was, some learners accepted negative feedback as part of their learning process, and it did not make them less eager to work hard at all.

It is essential to mention here that the students can write well if they read comprehensively (Daane, 1991; Grobe & Grobe, 1977; Stotsky, 1983, cited in Payne, 2012). Therefore, large-scale reading can inspire students to write more effectively. Unfortunately, not all students are extensive readers. Moreover, in this small-scale study, it has been found that several participants believed that being accomplished writers would eventually help them get good grades for which they put plenty of effort into improving their writing patterns. These learners believed that to be good writers, they needed to engage in essay-writing tasks using a variety of topics within the classroom, and they also needed more assignments to improve their writing skills.

### **Limitations**

Being a pilot study, the research paper had a certain level of limitations. To begin with, a small number of subjects from one Bangladeshi public university had made it probably complicated to generalize the outcomes attained in this study. Additionally, the number of participants was small, and only twenty items were provided in the questionnaire to conduct the study. And so, some other items could have been added in the questionnaire for an in-depth understanding. Yet, it is likely to conclude that, as a whole, the results were in line with the notion that learners need a considerable amount of motivation and constructive feedback to write essays more productively. Besides,

as the evaluation process of the essays is a time-consuming enterprise, the researcher could not take more subjects to conduct the study on a large scale. Open or semi-structured interviews from the learners along with the instructors would be effective tools to investigate it further; due to time constraints, these instruments could not be used. Future studies involving more participants from other universities will result in a more reliable and real picture of the scenario.

### Conclusion and Recommendations

No matter what career path the students choose, they will often be required to write on different issues, mostly in an essay format. However, everyone's writing ability is not the same, and the motivation level of each learner differs from one another. Thus, the beginner level of students needs a great deal of motivation to polish their writing strategies in class. Furthermore, constructive feedback from the teachers can also encourage the students to develop their expertise in writing. Since this research was a pilot study, this opens a lot of scopes for new researchers to expand it to wider participants to do more large-scale projects in our context.

Despite every effort, some students may not be well-motivated to write effective essays in the classroom, even when the teachers take up several approaches to encourage the learners in full measure. At that time, it is quite difficult to pinpoint the source of this "absence of motivation". Therefore, researches can be conducted in this area to check and analyze the matter thoroughly. Besides, more investigations can be made on which type of essay or what stage of essay-writing activity can properly motivate the students to enhance their writing skills in class. Limitations of the present study are suggested for further investigation in this regard.

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## Appendix

### Research Questionnaire

**Rating Scale: Likert Scale:** 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly agree.

<b>Group One: Students' level of motivation during essay writing</b>					
<b>Statements</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
1. I enjoy writing.					
2. I complete writing assignments even when it is difficult.					
3. Being a good writer will help me do well academically.					
4. I always brainstorm before writing essays.					
5. Spelling is easy for me during the essay composition.					
6. I practice writing in order to improve my skills.					
7. I can write essays well on contemporary topics.					
8. I enjoy writing assignments that challenge me.					
9. I put a lot of effort into my writing					
10. I am very motivated during writing an essay.					
<b>Group Two: Problems due to different patterns of essays</b>					
11. Some essay patterns confuse me during composition.					
12. I look for words while writing an essay.					
13. I always fear that my organization of essay is not up to the mark.					
14. I feel confused about writing a good thesis statement.					
15. I do not focus on grammar too much during writing essays.					
16. I feel anxious when I have to write essays on any sensitive issue.					
17. Before writing an essay I usually read a lot on the topic.					
<b>Group Three: Feedback to enhance motivation</b>					
18. I like to get feedback from my teacher on my writing.					
19. Negative feedback on my writing makes me demotivated.					
20. I feel happy when the teacher gives several writing assignments.					

The statements are adapted and modified from the "Academic Writing Motivation Questionnaire © 2012 Ashley Payne."

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