



EXAMINATION ORIENTED LANGUAGE LEARNING: ENGLISH IS STILL A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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RESEARCH ARTICLE



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Abstract

In Bangladesh, English continues to function as a foreign language, yet it remains central to academic success because of its role in high-stakes examinations. This study investigates how an examination-oriented approach shapes language learning practices in secondary schools. In adopting a qualitative design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions with students, teachers, and parents. Ethical principles, including confidentiality, informed consent, and voluntary participation, were maintained throughout the research process. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, allowing for the identification of patterns and underlying meanings in participants' experiences. The findings indicate that classroom practices and parental expectations are heavily influenced by the examination system. Students often rely on memorization and grammar-focused drills, whereas teachers prioritize strategies that prepare learners for written tests rather than developing communicative skills. Parents generally support this orientation, perceiving English proficiency as essential for higher education and career opportunities, yet their views remain tied to examination outcomes. In contrast, students frequently express frustration at the gap between classroom learning and real-life language use. The study concludes that the dominance of examination-driven practices reinforces English as a foreign language rather than fostering authentic language competence. These insights underscore the need for pedagogical reforms that integrate communicative language teaching with assessment requirements. By addressing this imbalance, English education in Bangladesh could shift toward preparing learners for practical use beyond the classroom.

Keywords: Examination, English as a foreign language, Secondary education in Bangladesh, Thematic analysis

Introduction

In many postcolonial and multilingual societies, English occupies a paradoxical position: it functions simultaneously as a foreign, second, and global language. In Bangladesh, English remains an indispensable tool for higher education, socioeconomic mobility, and international communication, however, English continues to be learned largely for academic success rather than communicative competence (Hamid & Baldauf, 2008; Rahman, 2021). The historical legacy of English education in the subcontinent, inherited from British colonial administration, has created an enduring emphasis on examination performance rather than communicative proficiency (Rahman & Pandian, 2018). This historical orientation continues to shape students' attitudes, teachers' pedagogical choices, and institutional policies across the secondary education sector. Globally, language teaching methodologies have undergone substantial evolution from grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods to communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based approaches (Richards & Rodgers, 2014; Nunan, 2003). These shifts reflect broader recognition that language learning is a process of meaning-making, not merely rule acquisition. However, in contexts such as Bangladesh, pedagogical reforms often collide with entrenched examination systems that reward rote memorization and grammatical accuracy (Chowdhury & Ha, 2008). The result is an education system where English proficiency is equated with test results rather than authentic communicative ability. English in Bangladesh occupies a distinctive socio-educational space. Although Bengali is the national and official language, English functions as a gatekeeper language for higher education, employment, and international engagement (Erling, 2015). The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) has repeatedly emphasized the communicative aims of English instruction, particularly through the introduction of CLT in the early 1990s (Hamid, 2010). Theoretically, this reform sought to shift teaching from a structural paradigm to a communicative paradigm. In practice, however, classroom realities remain deeply examination-centered. Secondary-level English instruction, particularly at the secondary school certificate (SSC) stage, is dominated by textbook completion, model test drills, and the prediction of "common questions." Teachers often feel constrained by time, syllabus load, and parental expectations to ensure

high pass rates (Ali & Walker, 2014). Consequently, even though curricula promote communicative tasks such as pair work or information-gap activities, these tasks are often neglected or performed superficially (Rahman, 2019). The assessment culture reinforces this imbalance: national examinations test grammar, writing, and reading comprehension but neglect listening and speaking skills. Thus, the education system rewards linguistic form over function. A number of studies have described the resulting disconnect between policy and practice. (Hamid and Honan 2012) argue that Bangladesh exemplifies a situation where global pedagogical discourses of CLT are recontextualized in an exam-driven local reality. Teachers, faced with large classes and limited resources, often adapt CLT principles selectively, creating a hybrid model that privileges exam outcomes. Similarly, (Sultana, 2019) noted that teachers' accountability is tied to students' results, compelling them to teach "to the test." Consequently, communicative language teaching remains more of policy ideal than a classroom reality.

Despite continuous curriculum reform and teacher training initiatives, English language learning in Bangladesh remains largely examination oriented. Students learn to reproduce memorized texts rather than develop interactive competence. This examination-centered approach not only limits communicative development but also affects learner motivation, creativity, and confidence in real-life language use (Barman, 2016). While CLT is officially promoted, assessment practices still prioritize accuracy, structure, and written expression. Teachers find themselves navigating conflicting expectations: the curriculum encourages communicative practice, but the examination system rewards traditional mastery. As a result, classroom practices, parental attitudes, and students' learning strategies revolve around examination performance (Rahman & Pandian, 2018). This creates an enduring tension between policy rhetoric and pedagogical reality that sustains English as a "foreign" rather than a functional language in the Bangladeshi context. The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the influence of examination-oriented practices on English language teaching and learning in Bangladeshi secondary schools. It seeks to understand how students, teachers, and parents perceive examinations and how these perceptions shape motivation, learning strategies, and classroom practices. The study further explores the conflicts between CLT principles and assessment practices and, finally, proposes reform paths that can balance examination demands with the development of authentic communicative competence. Through a qualitative design incorporating in-depth interviews and focus-group discussions, this research captures the lived experiences of students, teachers, and parents. By situating their voices within broader theoretical and policy debates, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on how to reconcile examination culture with communicative goals in English language education.

The study is guided by the following research questions: A) How does an examination-oriented approach influence English language learning and teaching practices in Bangladeshi secondary schools? B) How do students, teachers, and parents perceive the role of examinations in shaping English language learning outcomes? C) In what ways does an examination-driven culture affect students' motivation, learning strategies, and communicative competence in English? D) What tensions exist between communicative language teaching (CLT) principles and the assessment practices prevalent in secondary education? E) How can English language pedagogy in Bangladesh be reformed to balance examination requirements with the development of authentic communicative skills?

This study is significant in several respects. First, it provides empirical insights into the continuing dominance of examination culture in English language classrooms in Bangladesh. Although previous studies (Hamid, 2010; Ali & Walker, 2014; Sultana, 2019) have documented the limitations of exam-driven instruction, few have triangulated perspectives from students, teachers, and parents. Second, the research sheds light on the pedagogical implications of this culture in terms of how it shapes teacher decision-making, student motivation, and classroom interaction. Third, the findings contribute to the ongoing debate on the localization of CLTs. While CLT is widely endorsed internationally (Richards, 2006; Brown, 2007), its success depends on contextual adaptation. The Bangladeshi experience highlights how global teaching models interact with local assessment regimes, sociocultural norms, and institutional pressures. By documenting these dynamics, this study not only enriches the literature on CLT implementation but also offers practical implications for curriculum planners and policymakers. Finally, the study is relevant to stakeholders beyond Bangladesh. Many education systems across Asia, Africa, and the Middle East face similar tensions between communicative pedagogy and high-stakes testing (Littlewood, 2011; Cheng & Curtis, 2010). Therefore, the insights generated here may inform broader regional and international efforts to design assessment systems that genuinely support communicative language learning. This research draws on sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and washback theory (Alderson & Wall, 1993) to interpret how examinations shape teaching and learning behaviors. Sociocultural theory emphasizes that language learning occurs through social interaction and meaningful communication. From this perspective, an examination system that marginalizes communicative practice undermines the social dimension of learning. Washback theory, meanwhile, explains how testing influences teaching and learning. Negative washback occurs when examinations encourage memorization and restrict creativity, whereas positive washback promotes learning that aligns with communicative objectives (Bailey, 1999). By applying these theoretical lenses, the study analyses how Bangladesh's examination practices generate predominantly negative washback, constraining both pedagogy and learner development. The research focuses on secondary-level English education, particularly within the context of the SSC examination. It explores experiences from selected urban and semiurban schools across Bangladesh. Although the findings may not be generalizable to all contexts, they provide deep qualitative insights into systemic patterns affecting English pedagogy. The study does not examine tertiary institutions or primary schools, or evaluate textbook content in detail. Instead, it centers on participants' experiences, perceptions, and classroom practices related to examination-oriented learning.

In summary, this study positions examination-oriented English learning in Bangladesh as a critical issue that intersects with pedagogy, policy, and societal expectations. The persistence of exam-driven practices reflects deep-rooted structural and cultural factors that cannot be addressed through curriculum reform alone. By examining how examinations shape motivation, learning behavior, and classroom practices, this research seeks to contribute to a more balanced model of English education that honors both the academic standards and the communicative needs of learners in a globalized world.

Literature Review

The dominance of examinations in shaping English language learning practices in Bangladesh remains an enduring challenge for educators, learners, and policymakers. Although English is acknowledged as an essential subject for academic and professional advancement, it continues to be treated as a foreign language with limited communicative application. The examination system, which prioritizes accuracy, memorization, and written responses, heavily influences pedagogical choices within schools. As a result, English teaching often becomes a vehicle for test preparation rather than a means of developing authentic language skills. This literature review explores how such an examination-oriented culture affects language learning at the secondary level, considering global insights, local experiences, and the tension between policy ambitions and classroom realities.

English as a Foreign Language in Bangladesh: English has long held a paradoxical position in Bangladesh's educational landscape. It functions simultaneously as a foreign language and as a critical determinant of social and economic mobility (Hamid & Baldauf, 2008). Historically, English education was tied to colonial administration and the aspiration for upward mobility. Even after independence, its symbolic capital remained intact, marking English proficiency as a sign of modernity and success (Imam, 2005). However, despite its prominence in education and employment, it remains rarely used in everyday communication. This disjunction has contributed to English being studied as a foreign language with limited integration into students' real-life contexts (Rahman & Pandian, 2018). The sociolinguistic setting of Bangladesh thus reflects a broader postcolonial struggle between globalization and local identity. Scholars such as (Coleman 2010) and (Kirkpatrick 2017) argue that English serves as both an instrument of opportunity and a mechanism of exclusion. The educational system privileges those who can master English, creating disparities between urban and rural learners. Consequently, while English represents access to global knowledge, its acquisition often occurs through rigid, examination-driven learning rather than communicative interaction (Hamid, Jahan, & Islam, 2013). This dichotomy continues to reinforce its status as a foreign, rather than a second, language.

Examination-Oriented Learning and Its Pedagogical Impact: In many educational systems, examinations act as powerful drivers of curriculum and instruction. In Bangladesh, the influence of high-stakes examinations on teaching and learning is particularly pronounced. Studies have consistently shown that English instruction at the secondary level is dominated by exam preparation strategies rather than communicative engagement (Ali & Walker, 2014). Teachers frequently rely on rote learning, grammar translation, and repetition of model answers, all aimed at ensuring that students achieve desirable grades in the secondary school certificate (SSC) and higher secondary certificate (HSC) examinations (Rahman, 2019). This phenomenon reflects what (Cheng, 2005) described as washback the way, i.e., how influences both teaching content and learner behavior. When exams focus primarily on written accuracy, grammatical precision, and memorized formats, classroom practices naturally mirror those expectations. In such environments, communicative activities are perceived as nonessential or even distracting. As a result, learners rarely develop the confidence or fluency required for real-life interaction in English. Moreover, the cultural value attached to examinations in South Asia reinforces this orientation. Success in national examinations is seen not only as an academic achievement but also as a social indicator of intelligence and discipline (Tsagari & Cheng, 2017). Within this framework, teachers, parents, and students become collectively bound by the goal of passing exams, often at the expense of meaningful language acquisition. The consequence is a cyclical process where examination results determine teaching priorities, which in turn reinforce examination dependency.

The Introduction and Challenges of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT): The adoption of communicative language teaching (CLT) in Bangladesh was intended to counteract the limitations of traditional grammar-based methods. Introduced during the 1990s under curriculum reform, CLT sought to prioritize fluency, interaction, and real-world communication (Littlewood, 2007). However, despite strong policy advocacy, its practical implementation has been inconsistent and largely superficial. (Rahman 2015) and (Sultana 2018) noted that teachers often struggle to reconcile CLT principles with an examination system still grounded in rote learning and grammar translation. This mismatch between curriculum policy and classroom practice has been described as a "policy-practice gap" (Hamid & Baldauf, 2008). Teachers frequently express frustration at being encouraged to promote communicative learning while still being evaluated through noncommunicative exams. Consequently, they tend to blend old and new methodologies that teach grammar through communicative examples but ultimately prepare students for exam-specific tasks (Karim & Rahman, 2020). The large class sizes, limited training opportunities, and resource constraints commonly reported in Bangladeshi schools further complicate the shift towards CLT (Chowdhury & Le Ha, 2008). Similar issues are found across Asia, where CLTs have been imported into educational systems with strong exam traditions. (Carless 2012) noted that in such contexts, communicative teaching often becomes "symbolic adoption" embraced in policy rhetoric but is largely absent in classroom reality. In Bangladesh, the absence of oral assessments or interactive components in national examinations continues to discourage teachers from engaging students in spoken communication (Rahman & Karim, 2021). The result is an English curriculum that appears progressive in theory but remains constrained by entrenched assessment practices.

Parental and Societal Expectations: Parental influence plays a pivotal role in maintaining examination-oriented language learning. In Bangladeshi society, English is often regarded as a pathway to prestige and better employment opportunities. Parents view their children's success in English examinations as essential for social advancement, equating high grades with proficiency and intelligence (Hamid, 2010). This perception creates immense pressure on students to prioritize test performance over communicative competence. (Bourdieu's 1991) concept of linguistic capital aptly explains this dynamic. English functions not merely as a language but also as a resource that signifies educational and economic privilege. However, because parents often lack exposure to communicative language use, they interpret proficiency through exam results rather than interactive ability. As a result, their expectations inadvertently reinforce rote learning practices. (Rahman and Pandian 2018) reported that many parents support the examination system precisely because it provides measurable outcomes, even if those outcomes fail to reflect genuine language competence. This shared focus among teachers, students, and parents on grades perpetuates a culture where examinations are viewed as both the means and the end of language learning. While such expectations might motivate short-term academic achievement, they simultaneously stifle the development of functional English skills necessary for higher education and employment.

Learner perspectives: frustration and disengagement: From the learners' standpoint, the overemphasis on examination success creates a disconnect between what they study and what they perceive as useful. Several studies have highlighted that although Bangladeshi students often achieve high marks in English, they struggle to use the language effectively in real-life situations (Islam, 2021). They expressed frustration that their learning revolves around memorizing passages, writing formulaic essays, and reproducing answers from guidebooks. The lack of meaningful interaction within the classroom environment leads to decreased motivation and confidence in using English communicatively (Sultana, 2020). This disconnect is consistent with what (Hu 2002) refers to as the paradox of English learning high investment of time and resources, but minimal communicative gain. Students often perceive English as an academic subject rather than a living language. Their sense of achievement becomes tied to examination scores, not communicative success. This misalignment not only limits linguistic competence but also contributes to anxiety and alienation from the learning process. The emotional consequences of such an approach particularly stress, boredom, and fear of failure further reduce students' willingness to engage creatively with the language (Rahman, 2019).

Teachers' Pedagogical Practices and Institutional Constraints: Teachers remain central to the way examination pressures are negotiated and reproduced in the classroom. In the Bangladeshi context, educators often operate under systemic constraints that restrict innovation and creativity. A heavy focus on examinations means that lesson plans, classroom materials, and even student teacher interactions are designed to maximize exam results rather than promote linguistic development (Ali & Walker, 2014). As a consequence, teaching becomes formulaic, guided by past question papers, grammar exercises, and memorized compositions. (Rahman 2015) reported that many teachers express dissatisfaction with this approach but feel powerless to deviate from established norms, fearing that their students might perform poorly in national assessments. This sense of accountability to test outcomes creates what (Sultana 2018) terms pedagogical compliance a situation where teachers follow practices they know are pedagogically limiting, simply because the institutional system demands it. The scarcity of professional development opportunities and the lack of alignment between curriculum objectives and assessment design further exacerbate this problem. (Karim and Rahman 2020) introduce the concept of exam-centered communicative pedagogy, describing how some teachers attempt to blend communicative activities within exam-focused frameworks. For example, teachers might use dialogues or roleplays but ultimately return to grammar correction and model answers before examinations. While pragmatic, such compromises rarely transform the underlying learning culture. The absence of oral components in formal assessments means that communicative competence remains undervalued. As a result, English language teaching (ELT) continues to function more as a testing system than as a learning experience (Hoque, 2011).

Assessment Reform: The Missing Link: A consistent theme across the literature is the urgent need for reforming assessment systems. Scholars agree that meaningful pedagogical change is unlikely to occur unless testing practices evolve accordingly (Cheng, 2005; Tzagari) & (Cheng, 2017). In Bangladesh, existing English examinations overwhelmingly assess reading and writing, with little attention given to speaking and listening. This imbalance perpetuates a narrow conception of language competence, reducing English learning to written performance. (Rahman and Pandian 2018) argued that the curriculum's communicative goals cannot be realized until assessments incorporate tasks that measure oral fluency, listening comprehension, and contextual language use. However, reforming national examinations presents significant logistical and cultural challenges. Teachers require training to assess communicative competence effectively, whereas institutions must adapt to new methods of evaluation. Some researchers advocate the inclusion of formative assessments such as portfolios, group projects, and classroom-based speaking tests that reflect real-world communication (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2019). These alternatives encourage continuous learning rather than one-time performance. In this context, (Hamid 2010) stresses that the shift towards authentic assessment should be gradual, contextsensitive, and supported by teacher training initiatives. Without such systemic support, attempts to integrate communicative tasks into assessment are likely to remain symbolic rather than substantive.

Thematic and qualitative perspectives: Recent qualitative studies have provided deeper insights into how students, teachers, and parents experience the pressures of an examination-dominated learning culture. (Rahman 2019) used thematic analysis to explore recurring patterns of anxiety, dependency, and disillusionment among participants. Students described feeling trapped in a cycle of memorization, while teachers acknowledged their pedagogical constraints. Moreover parents, viewed exam results as the most reliable indicator of educational success. These themes reveal how deeply the examination mentality is ingrained within Bangladeshi society. (Sultana 2020) identified a culture of compliance within English classrooms, where all stakeholders'

teachers, students, and administrators accept exam-centered practices as inevitable. These findings suggest that examination orientation is not simply a pedagogical issue but rather a social and institutional phenomenon. It reflects broader values about success, discipline, and merit. (Islam 2021) added that students internalize these norms early in their schooling, leading to a limited perception of language learning as test preparation rather than communication. The thematic analysis of teacher interviews further underscores the psychological toll of this system. Many educators reported feelings of frustration and professional stagnation, as their creative autonomy is constrained by exam requirements. These qualitative insights highlight the need for reform not only at the curricular and assessment levels but also in the attitudes and expectations that shape language learning behavior.

Pedagogical innovation and future directions: Addressing the dominance of examination-oriented learning requires systemic reform that integrates communicative pedagogy with practical assessment mechanisms. (Carless 2012) suggested that successful innovation in such contexts must balance local realities with global pedagogical trends. Rather than importing Western models of communicative teaching wholesale, reforms should adapt these principles to the Bangladeshi educational culture. This approach would allow teachers to incorporate communicative strategies within familiar structures, making them more sustainable and contextually relevant. (Rahman and Karim 2021) advocate for blended assessment frameworks that reward both linguistic accuracy and communicative competence. For example, oral components, interactive writing tasks, and group discussions could be included alongside traditional written tests. Such methods would provide a more comprehensive picture of students' abilities while motivating them to develop functional language skills. Teacher training is another critical factor. Without sustained professional development, even well-designed reforms may fail to influence classroom practices. (Chowdhury and Le Ha 2008) argued that teachers must be given both theoretical understanding and practical tools to implement communicative activities effectively. Equally important is raising parental awareness about the value of communicative competence beyond examination performance. When parents begin to view English as a tool for interaction rather than merely academic success, the pressure for rote learning may gradually diminish. Technological integration also offers promising possibilities. Online learning platforms and digital language tools can provide students with opportunities to practice English in authentic contexts outside the classroom. However, such innovations must be accompanied by equitable access and teacher training to prevent widening existing educational disparities (Kirkpatrick, 2017).

Towards a Balanced Language Education: A sustainable solution to examination-oriented learning requires a shift in educational philosophy. Rather than perceiving examinations and communicative learning as opposing forces, they should be understood as complementary. As Brown and (Abeywickrama. 2019) Notably, assessments can be designed to encourage communication by incorporating authentic language tasks that mirror real-world use. This integration would allow examinations to serve both evaluative and pedagogical functions. In the context of Bangladesh, where English remains a gatekeeper for higher education and employment, the challenge lies in aligning the practical demands of the system with the educational goal of communicative competence. Reforms should therefore prioritize alignment between curriculum, assessment, and pedagogy. Teacher empowerment, parental involvement, and student engagement must be central to this process. When all stakeholders recognize communication as a legitimate educational outcome, English may begin to evolve from a foreign subject to a living language of expression and opportunity.

The reviewed literature painted a consistent picture: English learning in Bangladesh remains largely examination-driven, prioritizing memorization and accuracy over communication and creativity. This orientation is sustained by a network of institutional expectations, parental pressures, and assessment structures. While the introduction of communicative language teaching represented a significant policy shift, its potential has been curtailed by the rigidity of the examination system. To transform English education meaningfully, reforms must address not only teaching methods but also deeper cultural attachments to examinations as measures of worth. Incorporating communicative assessment, enhancing teacher training, and promoting awareness among parents and policymakers are essential steps toward balance. Ultimately, overcoming the entrenched dominance of examinations could help reposition English as a language for interaction, participation, and empowerment rather than merely a subject to be mastered for marks.

Methodology

The methodological design of our study was shaped by the overarching aim of exploring how examination-oriented practices influence English language learning at the secondary level in Bangladesh. Given that the phenomenon under investigation involves complex social interactions, institutional pressures, and subjective perceptions, a qualitative research approach was deemed most appropriate. This methodology enables the collection of in-depth insights into the lived experiences of teachers, students, and parents whose educational practices and beliefs are molded by the dominance of examinations. The research followed an interpretivist paradigm, which recognizes reality as socially constructed and context-dependent (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). This philosophical orientation allowed the researcher to examine participants' meanings and attitudes rather than quantify their behavior. Through qualitative inquiry, the study sought to uncover patterns of thought, cultural values, and pedagogical practices that perpetuate examination-centered learning.

A descriptive qualitative design was adopted to document and interpret participants' experiences without imposing predetermined categories. This design aligns with (Creswell and Poth's 2018) assertion that descriptive qualitative studies are ideal when researchers aim to present a comprehensive summary of a phenomenon as experienced by individuals. Unlike grounded theory or phenomenology, which seek to generate new theoretical frameworks, descriptive qualitative research focuses

on capturing detailed accounts of social realities. In the present study, the design facilitated the exploration of three interrelated domains: (a) classroom instruction shaped by examination demands, (b) parental expectations and their impact on learning behavior, and (c) students' perceptions of their English learning experiences. These dimensions were investigated through semistructured interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) to elicit nuanced perspectives and promote reflection among participants.

Our research was conducted across ten secondary schools in the Sylhet metropolitan area. The selected schools followed the national curriculum and participated in the secondary school certificate (SSC) examination. English was taught as a compulsory subject from grades six to ten, with a curriculum emphasizing both grammar and reading comprehension. The schools were chosen purposively to represent variations in teaching resources, teacher qualifications, and the socioeconomic backgrounds of the students. This contextual diversity enabled the researcher to observe how examination orientation manifests differently across educational settings. As (Rahman and Pandian, 2018) note, that urban schools often have access to more qualified teachers and materials, yet they remain equally constrained by examination expectations. The semiurban schools, meanwhile, provided valuable insights into how resource limitations compound the pressures of exam preparation.

Our study employed purposive sampling, a nonprobability technique that selects participants on the basis of their relevance to the research objectives (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016). The sample consisted of 100 participants: 50 students, 30 teachers, and 20 parents. Each group contributed distinct perspectives to understanding how examination-driven practices influence English learning. A) Students were selected from grades nine and ten, as they were preparing directly for SSC examinations. Their experiences offered firsthand accounts of classroom activities, learning strategies, and exam-related stress. B) Teachers included those who had taught English at the secondary level for at least five years. Their insights were crucial for understanding instructional priorities, assessment practices, and professional constraints. C) Parents were chosen on the basis of their children's current enrolment in the selected schools. They provided a contextual understanding of family expectations and societal pressures surrounding English education. The inclusion of multiple participant groups enabled triangulation, thereby strengthening the validity of the study through the convergence of perspectives (Denzin, 2017).

Semi structured interviews: Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection tool. This method offered flexibility to probe deeper into participants' experiences while maintaining a consistent thematic framework (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Separate interview guides were designed for teachers, students, and parents. The questions addressed themes such as the following: A) The perceived importance of English in academic success. B) Teaching and learning practices influenced by examinations. C) Attitudes toward communicative competence versus exam performance. D) Emotional and psychological effects of exam pressure. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes and was conducted in either English or Bangla, depending on the participants' comfort levels. All interviews were audio-recorded with consent and later transcribed verbatim for analysis. Focus group discussions (FGDs): To complement individual interviews, two focus group discussions were held with students and one with teachers. FGDs allow participants to engage with one another's experiences and generate collective reflections (Morgan, 2019). Each group comprised six to eight participants. The discussions were moderated to ensure inclusivity and prevent dominance by any single member.

FGDs proved particularly useful in revealing shared frustrations about the mismatch between examination preparation and communicative needs. They also illuminated peer-based learning strategies and social dynamics, which are often absent in one-to-one interviews.

Ethical integrity was maintained throughout the research process in accordance with the guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018). The participants were provided with detailed information sheets outlining the purpose, scope, and voluntary nature of their involvement. Written consent was obtained from all the adult participants and from the parents or guardians of the student participants. Confidentiality was assured by anonymizing participants' names and institutions during transcription and reporting. The data were securely stored in password-protected digital folders accessible only to the researcher. The study also adhered to the principle of nonmaleficence, ensuring that no participant experienced emotional or academic disadvantage as a result of their participation (Cohen et al., 2018). Given the hierarchical culture within Bangladeshi schools, particular care was taken to prevent students from feeling coerced into participation by their teachers. The researcher clarified that involvement affects neither academic standing nor teacher evaluations.

The data were analyzed through thematic analysis, as outlined by (Braun and Clarke 2006). This method was selected because it provides a flexible yet systematic approach for identifying patterns across qualitative data. The analysis followed six recursive steps: (1) familiarization with the data through repeated reading, (2) initial coding of significant statements, (3) searching for emerging themes, (4) reviewing and refining themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) writing up analytical interpretations. The transcripts from the interviews and FGDs were imported into NVivo 12 to facilitate coding and theme organization. The initial codes—such as memorization strategies, teacher compliance, parental pressure, and exam anxiety—were later clustered into broader themes: (a) institutionalized exam culture, (b) communicative-academic dissonance, and (c) aspirations versus frustration. These categories reflected both individual experiences and structural influences within the educational system. (Braun and Clarke's 2019) reflexive model was employed to ensure that the researcher remained aware of interpretative biases during coding. The analytic process was iterative rather than linear, allowing insights from one stage to inform subsequent readings. The inclusion of multiple data sources enhances reliability by enabling data triangulation (Patton, 2015).

Ensuring trustworthiness is essential in qualitative research to establish the credibility and integrity of findings. In this study, trustworthiness was maintained through the framework proposed by (Lincoln and Guba 1985), which includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility: Credibility refers to confidence in the truthfulness of the research findings. To enhance credibility, data were collected from multiple participant groups students, teachers, and parents allowing methodological triangulation. This convergence of perspectives ensures that interpretations reflect a shared social reality rather than individual bias (Denzin, 2017). Furthermore, member checking was conducted by sharing thematic summaries with participants for verification. Their feedback helped refine the accuracy of interpretations and minimize researcher assumptions. Prolonged engagement within the school environment also contributed to credibility. The researcher visited each site on multiple occasions, observing informal interactions and classroom routines, which provided a deeper contextual understanding of the participants' narratives.

Transferability: Transferability concerns the applicability of findings to other contexts. As qualitative research does not seek statistical generalization, rich thick descriptions were used to illustrate the social, cultural, and institutional dynamics of the schools. This approach allows readers and other researchers to assess whether the results may be relevant to similar educational settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Detailed contextual information such as class size, teacher background, and school type was provided to facilitate this process.

Dependability: Dependability relates to the consistency of the research process. To ensure dependability, an audit trail was maintained, documenting each stage of data collection and analysis. Field notes, interview schedules, and coding frameworks were systematically archived for transparency. In addition, peer debriefing was undertaken with two colleagues experienced in qualitative methodology. Their independent review of coding decisions and theme development helped confirm that interpretations were grounded in the data (Nowell, Norris, White, & Moules, 2017).

Confirmability: Confirmability addresses the degree to which findings are shaped by participants rather than researcher bias. Reflexivity plays a key role in maintaining confirmability. The researcher continuously recorded reflections in a reflexive journal to monitor personal assumptions, emotional responses, and potential influences on interpretation (Finlay, 2012). Quotations from participants were used extensively in the analysis to ensure that interpretations remained anchored in participants' voices.

The chosen methodology directly aligns with the study's objectives, which sought to explore how examination-oriented learning shapes English language acquisition at the secondary level. The qualitative design allowed the investigation of beliefs, motivations, and institutional dynamics that quantitative surveys might overlook. The semistructured interviews provided a platform for teachers, students, and parents to express nuanced views about examination practices, whereas the focus groups encouraged collective reflection. Through thematic analysis, these insights were organized into meaningful categories that illuminated the relationship between assessment culture and language learning behaviors. This approach not only met the research objectives but also contributed to a deeper understanding of the sociocultural context influencing English education in Bangladesh.

Beyond procedural ethics, the study also incorporated ethical reflexivity, which involves continuous reflection on how ethical decisions evolve throughout the research process (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). For example, during data collection, students occasionally expressed criticism of their teachers' methods. The researcher ensured that such disclosures were treated sensitively and anonymized to protect participants from potential repercussions. Ethical reflexivity thus extends beyond formal consent to include ongoing moral responsibility in representing participants respectfully and truthfully.

All digital recordings and transcripts were stored securely in encrypted files, and physical notes were kept in a locked cabinet. Data will be retained for five years in compliance with university ethical guidelines, after which they will be securely destroyed. Only anonymized data excerpts were used in reporting, ensuring that individual participants and schools remained unidentifiable. These measures conform to the principles of data protection and participant confidentiality outlined by the (BERA 2018) guidelines.

Findings

Theme 1.1: Predominance of Memorization and Exam Drills over Communicative Learning

Across the student and teacher interviews, a consistent narrative emerged regarding the dominance of rote learning and exam-focused drills within English classrooms. Most students (IDIs-04, IDIs-11, IDIs-23, IDIs-38) reported that their lessons were heavily oriented toward memorizing essays, grammar rules, and model answers likely to appear in the secondary school certificate (SSC) examination. This emphasis, they noted, left little room for creative or communicative activities. The students described how teachers often provided "common questions" or "suggestions" rather than encouraging original responses.

Teachers (IDIt-07, IDIt-12, IDIt-21) acknowledged this reality, explaining that the pressure to achieve high pass rates pushed them to prioritize test preparation. Several teachers openly admitted that they avoided extensive speaking or listening tasks because such activities were not directly assessed in the public examinations. One teacher (IDIt-14) remarked that *"our teaching must follow the exam structure; otherwise, students and parents complain that we waste time."*

As a result, classroom interactions largely revolve around reading comprehension, translation, and grammar transformation exercises rather than communicative engagement. Students across several schools mentioned that they rarely had opportunities to practice English conversation except when reading aloud from textbooks. Consequently, while exam performance often improved, functional language competence remained limited. The findings indicate that the examination system acts as a

curricular filter, shaping both teacher practices and learner behaviors toward short-term achievement instead of long-term communicative growth.

Theme 1.2: Teacher Adaptation and Pedagogical Constraints under Examination Pressure

The second major subtheme concerns how teachers modify their instructional strategies under the constraints of the examination system. Most teachers (IDIt-02, IDIt-09, IDIt-19, IDIt-27) expressed frustration at the lack of flexibility within the prescribed syllabus. They described feeling professionally constrained by a system that evaluates success through written tests only. Although many were aware of communicative language teaching (CLT) principles introduced in the national curriculum, their implementation remained minimal. Teachers reported that limited class time, large student numbers, and heavy emphasis on test results made it difficult to apply interactive methods.

One senior teacher (IDIt-03) observed that *“we have to teach for the exam, not for the language.”* This sentiment was echoed by others who explained that their performance evaluations as teachers often depend on their students’ pass rates. Consequently, they focused on teaching test techniques, including how to answer grammar-based questions efficiently, how to structure essays, and how to guess meanings in reading passages.

The students’ responses reinforced this trend. Several (IDIs-09, IDIs-26, IDIs-47) commented that teachers *“teach only what will come in the exam”* and that *“practicing speaking or listening is not considered important.”* Many expressed that they were aware of their limited spoken fluency but felt powerless to change the situation because the examination system determines both classroom time and teacher attention.

This subtheme therefore reveals that the examination-oriented framework not only shapes learners’ strategies but also restricts pedagogical innovation. Teachers function within a structure that rewards exam outcomes over communicative competence, reinforcing a cycle of teaching to the test that persists despite curricular reforms.

Theme 1.3: Student Motivation, Anxiety, and the Disconnection between Exam Success and Real-Life English Use

A third subtheme relates to students’ psychological responses to the examination-oriented approach and their perception of its relevance. While nearly all students interviewed recognized the importance of English for future education and employment, many (IDIs-05, IDIs-18, IDIs-33, and IDIs-49) described feeling anxious and demotivated by the constant focus on exams. They viewed English as a subject to be passed, not a language to be used. Some students expressed frustration that their high scores in English did not translate into confidence in speaking or understanding spoken English.

One student (IDIs-31) noted that *“we get A+ in English, but cannot talk with confidence.”* This statement captures the central paradox of the examination system: formal success without functional ability. Teachers corroborated this observation, admitting that their top-performing students often struggled in oral communication tasks or during interviews for higher studies.

Furthermore, the fear of poor exam results created a culture of dependency on private tuition. Both students and teachers mentioned that many learners attend coaching centers that focus almost entirely on exam strategies. This finding reinforces the notion that success equals memorization, marginalizing genuine learning experiences. Some students (IDIs-15, IDIs-41) also highlighted the emotional toll of repetitive drilling and the lack of creative engagement, which diminished their interest in English as a living language.

The evidence from both groups shows that examination-oriented practices have led to instrumental motivation, where learners study primarily for grades rather than for communicative mastery. Over time, this has deepened the divide between exam-based literacy and practical language competence, leaving students well-prepared for written tests but underprepared for authentic communication.

The findings collectively demonstrate that examination-oriented English learning in Bangladeshi secondary schools fosters a test-driven culture that prioritizes memorization, restricts pedagogical creativity, and diminishes students’ communicative ability. Teachers adapt their methods to meet institutional demands, while students equate English proficiency with exam performance. The result is a system that sustains English as a foreign rather than a functional language, underscoring the urgent need for assessment reform that integrates communicative competencies alongside academic evaluation.

Theme 2.1: Examinations as a Measure of Success and Social Expectation

Across all the focus groups, the participants expressed a shared belief that examinations define academic success and act as a gateway to social mobility. Both teachers and parents viewed strong examination results in English as indicators of future opportunity. Several parents (FGDp-03, FGDp-06) commented that high grades in English were *“a sign of a bright future”* and essential for university admission and employment. Similarly, many teachers (FGDt-05, FGDt-12) admitted that their own professional reputation often depended on students’ examination performance, compelling them to center classroom teaching on expected test content.

The students echoed this perception but from a different perspective. Most (FGDs-07, FGDs-18, and FGDs-24) associated English examinations with status and academic identity, describing top grades as a symbol of intelligence and discipline. However, they also recognized that exam preparation often overshadowed genuine interest in the language. One participant (FGDs-11) noted, *“We study English to get marks, not to learn how to use it.”*

This collective mindset positions examinations not merely as assessment tools but also as powerful social instruments that regulate expectations, motivate learning behaviors, and shape classroom priorities. Parents encourage exam-oriented study

habits; teachers align instruction with grading patterns; and students internalize the idea that achievement equals high marks, not communicative competence. Thus, examinations are perceived as both motivators and constraints, reinforcing conformity rather than creativity.

Theme 2.2: Awareness of the disconnection between examination achievement and real English competence

Despite their acceptance of examinations as necessary, most participants acknowledged a growing discrepancy between examination success and real communicative ability. Teachers across several schools (FGDt-02, FGDt-08, and FGDt-17) reported that students who performed well on written tests often struggled to express themselves in spoken English. They attributed this to the written-text focus of the SSC examination, which rewards grammatical accuracy and memorized content over interactive language use.

The students agreed that while they could reproduce model answers, they rarely felt confident speaking in English outside class. Many (FGDs-09, FGDs-21, FGDs-30) expressed embarrassment when asked to speak spontaneously, explaining that classroom tasks rarely required open conversation. A few candidly admitted that they *“forgot everything after the exam,”* highlighting a pattern of short-term memorization rather than durable learning.

Parents also recognized this gap. Several (FGDp-02, FGDp-09) reported that their children, despite achieving A grades, struggled to communicate with relatives or peers in English. One parent remarked that *“the marks look good on paper, but the language is still foreign.”*

This cross-group awareness demonstrates that stakeholders perceive examinations as academically legitimate but linguistically limited. The system measures compliance with curricular demands rather than authentic proficiency. Teachers explained that even when they wished to implement communicative activities, the assessment design left them little incentive. Consequently, English remains a subject to be tested rather than a language to be lived.

The findings therefore reveal collective dissonance: while all groups recognize the inadequacy of exam-based learning, they continue to uphold it as the standard measure of achievement due to institutional and societal pressures.

Theme 2.3: Emotional Consequences and the Call for Balanced Reform

A recurring discussion across all the FGDs concerned the emotional and psychological impact of examination-centered learning. Students frequently described feelings of anxiety, fatigue, and reduced self-confidence, particularly before major tests. Many (FGDs-04, FGDs-15, and FGDs-25) admitted that they viewed English as a “difficult and fearful subject” because performance was publicly compared among peers. The repetitive focus on grammar translation and essay memorization left them feeling disengaged.

Teachers echo these concerns, noting that examination pressure often discourages risk-taking and creativity. One teacher (FGDt-09) explained that “students fear mistakes more than they value learning.” This fear culture leads to safe, formulaic writing and a reluctance to experiment with language use. Teachers also reported personal stress, as their effectiveness was measured primarily by examination pass rates.

While acknowledging exam stress, parents still viewed examinations as necessary for discipline and accountability. However, several (FGDp-05, FGDp-10) expressed worry that excessive exam pressure undermined their children’s enjoyment of learning. They called for *“teaching that helps children speak naturally, not only write answers.”*

Despite differing roles, all the groups agreed on the need for a balance between assessment and communication. Suggestions included incorporating oral tests, group projects, and continuous assessment methods that reflect practical language use. The participants viewed such changes as potential relief from the rigid exam culture that dominates current English education.

This subtheme underscores the collective recognition that the present examination system generates both motivation and distress. Stakeholders desire reform but remain cautious, reflecting the deep institutional entrenchment of exam culture. Their voices suggest a gradual but growing shift in mindset towards valuing communicative competence alongside academic achievement.

The findings for Research Question 2 reveal a complex web of perceptions and contradictions surrounding the role of examinations in English language learning. Students, teachers, and parents collectively accept examinations as essential for progress, yet they also acknowledge that the current system measures memorization rather than meaningful use. Examinations are perceived simultaneously as a ladder to opportunity and a barrier to authentic learning.

Teachers and parents emphasize results and accountability, whereas students voice fatigue and frustration. Across all groups, there is an emerging consensus that reform is necessary particularly reforms that integrate communicative evaluation with written testing. Ultimately, the data demonstrate that examinations continue to shape learning outcomes in ways that sustain English as a foreign, test-centered subject rather than a living language of communication.

Theme 3.1: Instrumental Motivation and the Decline of Intrinsic Interest in Learning English

The interviews revealed that the overwhelming presence of examinations has transformed students’ motivation to learn English from intrinsic curiosity to instrumental necessity. Almost all the students (IDIs-03, IDIs-11, IDIs-18, and IDIs-26) described studying English mainly to secure good grades and meet parental or institutional expectations. They viewed English as an academic requirement rather than a skill for communication or personal growth. One participant (IDIs-22) remarked that *“we study English because we have to, not because we like it.”*

Teachers confirmed this trend, explaining that the reward structure of the education system – scholarships, promotion, and reputation – is tied to examination scores. Several (IDIt-05, IDIt-09, IDIt-15) admitted that they motivate students by highlighting grades and career benefits rather than fostering enjoyment of the language. This approach, while practical, narrows the motivational scope. A teacher (IDIt-07) summarized, *“Our students see English as a door to success, but not as a language for life.”*

As a result, students develop goal-oriented but short-lived motivation. They study intensively before examinations but lose interest afterwards. Many admitted that their enthusiasm fades once tests are over, indicating that extrinsic pressure, not genuine engagement, drives learning. Teachers associated this pattern with surface learning, where students’ memories vocabulary and structures without deeper understanding. Consequently, the examination-driven culture reinforces an instrumental mindset, eroding long-term motivation and reducing English learning to a means of academic survival rather than communicative empowerment.

Theme 3.2: Strategic Memorization and Test-Centred Learning Approaches

The second major pattern concerns students’ learning strategies, which are shaped predominantly by examination demands. Both groups consistently reported that memorization, repetition, and imitation dominate classroom and study practices. Students (IDIs-01, IDIs-08, IDIs-14, and IDIs-28) described spending hours memorizing model essays, grammar rules, and common questions from guidebooks. They emphasized the need to *“write exactly as in the book”* to secure higher marks.

Teachers recognized that such strategies limit creativity but feel compelled to reinforce it due to systemic expectations. Several researchers (IDIt-03, IDIt-12, IDIt-18) stated that classroom time is largely devoted to exam drills and answer-pattern training. A teacher (IDIt-10) explained that *“if we teach communicative tasks, students complain that it’s not useful for exams.”* This statement encapsulates the reciprocal reinforcement between student expectations and teaching practices under exam pressure.

Interestingly, a few students acknowledged the ineffectiveness of their learning methods. Some (IDIs-16, IDIs-25) admitted to forgetting most of what they had memorized after exams, whereas others expressed frustration that high scores did not translate into the ability to hold a conversation. Despite this awareness, they felt trapped in the system, describing exam preparation as *“the only safe way to pass.”*

Teachers also linked the prevalence of memorization to assessment design, which prioritizes accuracy over communicative expression. As one teacher (IDIt-04) noted, *“students are trained to write perfectly structured answers, not to think in English.”* Consequently, examination culture promotes rote strategies at the expense of problem-solving, creativity, and language use. The findings suggest that while these methods may yield academic success, they fail to develop the adaptive skills necessary for authentic communication.

Theme 3.3: Erosion of Communicative Competence and Confidence in Real-Life Use

A striking outcome across both the student and teacher interviews was the limited communicative competence resulting from exam-driven instruction. Teachers widely agreed that the current system neglects listening and speaking skills. Several studies (IDIt-01, IDIt-06, IDIt-13) reported that oral communication activities are rarely implemented because they are not assessed via public examination. One teacher remarked that *“if it’s not on the test, it’s not in the classroom.”*

The students account strongly reflected this reality. Many (IDIs-05, IDIs-12, IDIs-19, IDIs-27) admitted feeling nervous or embarrassed when asked to speak English spontaneously. Some described rehearsing memorized dialogues but struggling to respond naturally in conversation. They reported that lessons focus primarily on reading comprehension and grammar correction, with almost no opportunities for free speaking or listening exercises. A student (IDIs-09) summarized, *“We can write English, but we cannot speak it.”*

Teachers acknowledge the irony of the situation: learners achieve high marks yet remain linguistically passive. A few (IDIt-08, IDIt-17) have attempted to integrate communicative tasks but have faced resistance from school administrators and parents, who view such activities as unproductive. This systemic rigidity has created what one teacher termed a *“silent classroom culture”* students are attentive, disciplined, and accurate in writing, but largely voiceless in spoken English.

As a consequence, examination-driven practices produce uneven competence: strong grammatical and reading skills coexist with weak oral and interactive abilities. Teachers expressed concern that this imbalance leaves students underprepared for higher education or employment contexts where communicative English is essential. Some students themselves (IDIs-20, IDIs-30) expressed regret, stating that their schooling had taught them to *“pass exams, not to speak with people.”*

The findings therefore illustrate that the dominance of examinations not only constrains classroom methodology but also diminishes learners’ linguistic confidence, perpetuating English as an academic subject rather than a living communicative tool. The findings for Research Question 3 demonstrate that examination-driven culture profoundly influences students’ motivation, learning behavior, and communicative competence. Students are primarily extrinsically motivated, studying for grades rather than enjoyment or fluency. Their learning strategies are characterized by memorization and formulaic reproduction, reflecting a system that rewards correctness over creativity. As a result, communicative competence remains underdeveloped, with learners often unable to transfer written knowledge into spoken proficiency.

Teachers, caught between policy expectations and pedagogical ideals, inadvertently reinforce the same cycle through exam-focused instruction. The combined evidence suggests that Bangladesh’s examination culture sustains a performance-oriented

model of English learning that values measurable outcomes over meaningful communication, leaving students well-prepared for tests but ill-equipped for authentic language use beyond the classroom.

Theme 4.1: Pedagogical Misalignment between CLT Principles and Exam Expectations

The interviews revealed a pronounced mismatch between the ideals of communicative language teaching (CLT) and the realities of examination-focused classrooms. Both students and teachers consistently observed that while the national curriculum promotes communicative competence, assessment frameworks continue to prioritize grammar accuracy, translation, and written composition.

Teachers (IDIt-03, IDIt-07, IDIt-14) admitted that despite their awareness of CLT, they are compelled to adopt traditional, exam-oriented teaching strategies to ensure student success. One teacher explained, *“If I spend too much time on speaking tasks, parents complain that I’m wasting time instead of preparing for the board exam.”* Similarly, students (IDIs-05, IDIs-18, IDIs-26) reported that most classroom tasks involve memorizing essay templates, model answers, and grammatical structures because *“that’s what gets marks.”*

This misalignment has led to a dual pedagogical culture. On paper, teachers are required to develop communicative skills; in practice, their teaching is guided by exam content. A teacher (IDIt-10) described this as *“teaching one thing but testing another.”* Consequently, communicative activities such as pair work, discussions, and role plays are either reduced to a formality or excluded altogether.

The students’ reflections further confirmed this contradiction. Many (IDIs-09, IDIs-23, IDIs-37) expressed disappointment that speaking and listening lessons were rare, describing English classes as *“mostly writing practice for exams.”* This suggests that policy rhetoric promoting CLT has not translated into authentic classroom implementation, largely because assessment criteria continue to dictate pedagogical priorities.

Theme 4.2: Structural and Institutional Barriers to CLT Implementation

A second key theme emerging from the interviews concerns the institutional constraints that hinder the integration of CLT within exam-driven environments. Teachers frequently mentioned systemic issues such as large class sizes, inadequate training, insufficient materials, and a lack of administrative support. Several (IDIt-01, IDIt-08, IDIt-17, IDIt-22) highlighted that managing communicative activities with 60–70 students per class is unrealistic, particularly when exam preparation consumes most of the academic calendar.

In many schools, according to teachers, lesson planning revolves around past papers and marking schemes, leaving little room for communicative exercises. One teacher (IDIt-05) commented, *“We are told to make students talk, but the system only rewards what they can write.”* Another (IDIt-13) pointed out that even oral practice sessions are sometimes converted into written tests to align with assessment requirements.

Students echoed these concerns, noting that they rarely experience interactive lessons. Some (IDIs-12, IDIs-30, IDIs-36) mentioned that while teachers sometimes introduce group discussions, these discussions are quickly abandoned close to examination periods. One student remarked, *“When exams come, all the talking stops.”*

A further challenge lies in the professional development of teachers. Many teachers reported receiving theoretical instruction on CLT during training but little practical guidance on how to adapt communicative approaches to large, exam-focused classrooms. A few (IDIt-09, IDIt-20) confessed feeling *“pressured and confused”* about balancing communicative goals with exam preparation. This institutional dissonance perpetuates a cycle in which teachers revert to lecture-based instruction, students rely on memorization, and the communicative goals of CLT remain largely aspirational.

Ultimately, these findings suggest that the tension between CLT and assessment is not solely pedagogical but also deeply structurally embedded within resource limitations, teacher training systems, and institutional accountability mechanisms that measure success by grad rather than linguistic competence.

Theme 4.3: Perceived Irrelevance of CLT to Examination Success and Real-World Applications

The final subtheme concerns the perception gap among students and teachers regarding the relevance of CLT to both exam achievement and real-life English use. Students, in particular, viewed communicative activities as *“nice but useless”* (IDIs-02, IDIs-17, IDIs-32) compared with exam-focused preparation. Many confessed that speaking practice or role-play exercises were enjoyable but were seen as distractions from the core syllabus. One student remarked, *“Speaking in English is fun, but it doesn’t help in the exam paper.”*

Teachers similarly expressed frustration at this mismatch between learning value and assessment reward. Several (IDIt-04, IDIt-11, IDIt-19) admitted abandoning communicative tasks because students and parents considered them irrelevant to achieving high marks. A teacher (IDIt-06) observed, *“The system punishes creativity. Even if a student writes an original answer, examiners prefer the textbook version.”* This perception reinforces conformity and discourages risk-taking in language use.

Interestingly, a minority of teachers (IDIt-15, IDIt-21, IDIt-23) recognized the long-term benefits of communicative competence and attempted to integrate CLT activities informally—such as using short dialogues or storytelling before written practice. However, they acknowledged limited success due to the exam-oriented mindset shared by all stakeholders.

The students’ responses also reflected their anxiety and lack of confidence in spontaneous communication. Many (IDIs-07, IDIs-19, IDIs-33) reported that while they could write structured essays, they struggled to engage in unscripted conversations. This

highlights a fundamental paradox: the examination system promotes theoretical mastery of English, but fails to equip learners with the practical communicative abilities necessary for higher education or employment contexts.

Consequently, both groups perceive CLT as an idealistic framework detached from assessment realities, resulting in a pedagogical culture that values compliance over competence. As one teacher (IDIt-02) aptly summarized, *"We teach communication without communication."*

The findings for Research Question 04 reveal that significant tensions exist between the communicative ideals embedded in language policy and the assessment-driven practices dominating secondary English education in Bangladesh. Three interconnected tensions are evident:

- Pedagogical misalignment, where communicative aims are undermined by exam-centered instruction.
- Institutional constraints, including large class sizes, limited resources, and inadequate teacher preparation.
- Perceptual resistance, as students, teachers, and parents equate examination performance with success, marginalizing communicative competence.

Together, these tensions illustrate that the current assessment framework not only constrains the implementation of CLT but also redefines English learning as a written, rule-bound pursuit rather than an interactive, meaningful communicative process. Addressing these contradictions requires not only reforming classroom pedagogy but also reconceptualizing assessment standards to value authentic language use alongside academic accuracy.

Theme 5.1: Reconceptualizing assessment to reflect communicative competence

The teachers interviewed offered a clear and consistent argument: the existing assessment system must be restructured if genuine communicative teaching is to take root. Most participants agreed that current examinations, which prioritize grammar, translation, and writing accuracy, fail to capture learners' communicative ability. Teachers (IDIt-03, IDIt-07, IDIt-12, IDIt-18) repeatedly observed that students who achieve high scores often cannot express themselves fluently in English. As one teacher remarked, *"Our exams reward what students can remember, not what they can communicate."*

Many teachers expressed frustration at the disconnect between curriculum intentions and examination formats. Although national syllabuses encourage communicative language teaching (CLT), examinations continue to test discrete grammatical items and rehearse compositions. This has created a pedagogical paradox—teachers are encouraged to teach communicatively but are evaluated through traditional, form-focused measures. One teacher (IDIt-05) stated, *"We cannot teach communicative skills seriously because they don't appear in the question papers."*

The majority of teachers called for a gradual reform of the examination framework, proposing the inclusion of listening and speaking components in both school-based and national assessments. Some (IDIt-01, IDIt-10, IDIt-14, IDIt-21) suggested pilot projects in selected schools to integrate oral proficiency testing, whereas others emphasized the need for rubrics that assess fluency, interaction, and pronunciation rather than grammatical precision alone.

Teachers also highlighted the importance of alternative assessment strategies, such as project-based tasks, portfolios, and peer evaluations. A teacher (IDIt-09) described using short oral presentations and storytelling exercises in her classroom as a way to *"prepare students for real-life English, not just for the exam hall."* Several teachers agreed that school-level formative assessments could play a major role in balancing examination pressures with communicative goals.

However, participants recognized that assessment reform requires institutional commitment and examiner training. A few (IDIt-19, IDIt-25, IDIt-29) cautioned that adding oral components without adequate training could reproduce rote practices in a new format. Hence, any meaningful reform must include systematic examiner preparation, moderation procedures, and evaluation guidelines that encourage the authentic use of English.

In summary, teachers viewed assessment reform as the foundation for broader pedagogical change. Unless examinations recognize and reward communicative competence, classroom practices continue to be dominated by memorization and formulaic instruction.

Theme 5.2: Strengthening Teacher Professional Development and Pedagogical Autonomy

A second major theme emerging from the interviews concerned the professional readiness and autonomy of teachers in implementing communicative approaches. Most participants felt that inadequate training, limited exposure to practical CLT techniques, and rigid institutional expectations restricted their ability to balance communicative teaching with exam preparation. Teachers (IDIt-02, IDIt-08, IDIt-13, IDIt-20) explained that their training workshops often focus on theory rather than classroom application. One teacher described the issue succinctly: *"We are told what CLT is, but not how to make it work with 60 students and one textbook."* Several respondents noted that training sessions are usually short, formal, and dominated by lectures rather than interactive demonstrations. Consequently, teachers return to their classrooms uncertain about how to adapt communicative principles to exam-driven contexts.

Many participants emphasized the need for continuous professional development (CPD) rather than one-time training events. Some (IDIt-06, IDIt-11, IDIt-22) proposed school-based mentoring and peer-observation systems, enabling teachers to share techniques and reflect on practice. A teacher (IDIt-15) reported that informal collaboration with colleagues had helped her introduce small communicative tasks such as pair discussions before writing exercises without neglecting exam content.

Another recurrent concern was the lack of pedagogical autonomy. Teachers described feeling pressured by school administrations and parents to “*teach for the exam.*” Several (IDIt-04, IDIt-09, IDIt-17) noted that even when they attempted to use communicative activities, management discouraged them, arguing that these activities were “*not part of the syllabus.*” A teacher (IDIt-23) expressed frustration, stating, “*We want to teach creatively, but the system wants uniformity and results.*”

To counter this, teachers recommended granting greater flexibility in lesson planning, supported by clear institutional guidelines that recognize communicative activities as legitimate learning tasks. Some also urged the Ministry of Education to revise teacher evaluation criteria, ensuring that classroom creativity and communicative teaching are rewarded rather than penalized.

Moreover, several participants (IDIt-10, IDIt-18, IDIt-28) advocated for linkages between teacher training and assessment reform. They argued that when teachers are assessed or observed solely on students’ exam performance, they naturally resort to teaching to the test. Aligning professional evaluation with communicative outcomes would, therefore, encourage teachers to pursue more balanced pedagogy.

Overall, the findings under this subtheme reveal that teacher empowerment and professional development are indispensable for sustainable pedagogical reform. Without confident, skilled, and autonomous teachers, any top-down curricular or assessment change risks remaining superficial.

Theme 5.3: Creating an Integrated Pedagogical Culture through Policy and Classroom Innovation

The third subtheme highlights teachers’ vision for a more holistic and interconnected reform model, linking curriculum design, classroom methodology, and educational policy. The participants argued that sustainable reform requires collaboration across all levels of the education system from policymakers to classroom practitioners.

Teachers (IDIt-01, IDIt-16, IDIt-24, IDIt-27) proposed establishing curriculum committees that include practicing teachers to ensure that pedagogical realities inform policy decisions. They expressed concern that many reforms are designed by policymakers with little classroom experience. A teacher (IDIt-07) noted, “*Policies are written from the office, not from the classroom.*”

The participants also stressed the need for curricular integration, in which communicative activities are embedded within core lessons rather than treated as optional add-ons. Some teachers shared successful examples of integrating communication into exam preparation. For example, a teacher (IDIt-12) explained that she used short role plays to revise grammar lessons, encouraging students to apply structures in conversation. Another researcher (IDIt-26) designed group reading discussions that improved both comprehension and fluency. These examples show how exam-oriented and communicative goals can coexist when teachers innovate within their constraints.

Technology was identified as another promising tool for reform. Several teachers (IDIt-05, IDIt-09, IDIt-20) have suggested incorporating digital resources, audio-visual materials, and online interaction platforms to support listening and speaking practices. However, they acknowledged that such initiatives depend on reliable infrastructure and institutional investment.

The participants also called for a cultural shift in educational expectations. They argued that parents, school leaders, and policymakers must recognize communicative competence as a legitimate indicator of success. A teacher (IDIt-14) noted, “*Until parents stop asking for marks and start asking for fluency, nothing will change.*” To achieve this, public awareness campaigns and policy statements should highlight the importance of communication skills for higher education and employment.

Finally, the teachers emphasized that reform should be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Abrupt policy shifts could overwhelm schools; instead, small, incremental changes such as introducing oral tasks in formative assessments or redesigning textbooks to include communicative tasks would help build confidence among teachers and learners alike. One teacher (IDIt-30) summarized this view: “*Change must start with small steps that make sense to teachers and students.*”

In essence, this subtheme captures teachers’ aspiration for a collaborative, context-sensitive reform agenda that connects examination standards with the broader goal of meaningful language use.

The findings for Research Question 05 demonstrate that English language pedagogy in Bangladesh can be reformed only through a systemic realignment of assessment, teacher development, and institutional culture. Three interconnected areas of reform emerged:

- **Reconceptualizing assessment:** Incorporating communicative components and alternative evaluation methods to measure authentic language use alongside written accuracy.
- **Empowering Teachers:** Providing sustained professional development, pedagogical autonomy, and evaluation systems that reward communicative teaching practices.
- **Building an Integrated Culture of Reform:** Promoting coordination between policy, curriculum, and classroom practice, with active participation from teachers and community stakeholders.

Collectively, these insights underscore that balancing examination requirements with communicative competence is not merely a methodological challenge; rather, it is a question of educational philosophy and structural coherence. Teachers envision a future where examinations validate genuine communication, classrooms encourage creative expression, and language learning transcends the boundaries of rote memorization.

While demanding such reform, holds the promise of transforming English from a foreign examination subject into a living, functional language that empowers Bangladeshi students to engage confidently with the wider world.

Discussion

This chapter discusses the findings of the study in relation to the research questions, theoretical frameworks, and existing scholarship on English language teaching in Bangladesh. Drawing on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and washback theory (Alderson & Wall, 1993), the discussion interprets how the examination-oriented system influences teaching and learning, shapes perceptions and motivation, and constrains communicative development. The chapter further considers the tensions between policy and practice within the implementation of communicative language teaching (CLT), before concluding with implications for pedagogical reform.

The findings confirm that English language teaching and learning at the secondary level in Bangladesh remain predominantly examination-oriented. Teachers' and students' like-priority preparation for the secondary school certificate (SSC) examination, which continues to function as a decisive determinant of academic and social progression. This emphasis produces a classroom culture focused on memorization, grammar translation, and test prediction rather than on interactive or communicative learning. These findings are consistent with earlier research (Ali & Walker, 2014; Hamid, 2010; Sultana, 2019), which revealed that assessment practices in Bangladesh exert strong negative washback effects on pedagogy. The teachers interviewed in this study described feeling compelled to teach "to the test" due to institutional pressure and parental expectations. The students' responses corroborated this, with many noting that their success was measured not by communicative ability but by accuracy in written grammar exercises and predictable essay formats. From a Washback Theory perspective, such practices illustrate how examinations dictate the form and content of teaching. The alignment between test content and classroom instruction reinforces a narrow conception of language learning, where linguistic form is privileged over communicative meaning (Bailey, 1999). In this way, the examination system perpetuates a cycle of instrumental learning, restricting both teachers' methodological freedom and learners' opportunities for authentic language use.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal teachers' pragmatic adaptation to constraints. Some participants reported using exam materials as "entry points" to teach functional language skills, an approach reflecting contextual adaptation within a resource-limited system. This suggests that while the system fosters compliance, it does not entirely preclude pedagogical creativity. Teachers' willingness to mediate between policy ideals and exam demands reflects their agency within a rigid institutional framework (Rahman & Pandian, 2018).

Students, teachers, and parents shared the view that examinations are central to educational achievement and social mobility. However, their attitudes towards this centrality varied significantly. The students expressed mixed feelings: they acknowledged the necessity of exams but criticized their inability to assess real communicative ability. Moreover, parents tended to support exam-focused learning, viewing English as a symbol of success and modernity. Teachers, caught between policy directives and parental expectations, often view the exam system as a constraint rather than a choice. This triangulation of perceptions highlights how the sociocultural meanings of English in Bangladesh are intertwined with educational aspiration. As (Erling 2015) and (Hamid 2010) note, English carries prestige and opportunity, and examinations serve as tangible measures of that capital. Consequently, parents' and schools' prioritization of test performance is not simply pedagogical; it is socioeconomic and ideological. Students' frustrations about the gap between classroom learning and real-life communication echo earlier observations by (Barman 2016) and (Rahman (2021). Many described their inability to use English fluently despite years of study, attributing this to an overreliance on rote memorization and model answers. Similarly, teachers lamented the lack of time for oral communication activities, particularly given large class sizes and rigid syllabi. From a Sociocultural Theory perspective, this situation inhibits the social interaction necessary for authentic language development. (Vygotsky, 1978) emphasized that language learning is mediated through communicative exchanges; however, in examination-driven classrooms, such opportunities are systematically minimized. The result is a context of constrained participation, where learners engage with language as text rather than discourse.

These findings reinforce the argument that meaningful reform must address not only pedagogy but also stakeholder beliefs. Without transforming parental and institutional conceptions of success, any pedagogical innovation is likely to revert to exam-oriented behavior (Chowdhury & Ha, 2008). Thus, shifting perceptions is as vital as changing the curriculum.

A recurring theme across interviews was the negative impact of the examination culture on students' motivation and communicative confidence. Many students described English as a "subject to pass" rather than a language to use. This instrumental motivation often led to surface-level learning, where learners focus narrowly on test content rather than communicative mastery. Teachers observed that students rarely engaged in speaking or listening practice unless it was directly linked to assessment. This pattern reflects what Dorney (2005) describes as the controlled form of motivation, which is extrinsically driven by rewards and sanctions. In the Bangladeshi context, this is further reinforced by social pressures and the competitive nature of SSC results. This finding aligns with previous research (Rahman & Pandian, 2018; Sultana, 2019) which identified anxiety, demotivation, and lack of self-efficacy as consequences of exam-driven teaching. Communicative competence, as conceptualized by (Canali and Swain (1980), involves grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic dimensions. However, under examination constraints, only the grammatical component receives sustained attention. Listening and speaking remain largely unassessed, leading to their marginalization in the curriculum. Students' limited exposure to communicative contexts prevents the development of pragmatic fluency, thereby perpetuating English as a foreign rather than a functional language. Interestingly, some teachers reported attempting to integrate communicative elements such as pair work or short dialogues within exam preparation lessons. However, these practices are inconsistent and often treated as supplementary

rather than essential. This selective implementation underscores the systemic challenge of sustaining positive washback, where assessment supports rather than undermines communicative learning (Cheng & Curtis, 2010).

The findings reveal persistent tension between the theoretical framework of communicative language teaching (CLT) and the realities of classroom assessment. While national policy endorses CLT, the SSC examination continues to assess only reading and writing skills. Teachers described this as a “contradiction between policy and practice,” which forces them to neglect communicative activities in favour of exam preparation. This tension is not unique to Bangladesh but is characteristic of many developing education systems (Littlewood, 2011). In such contexts, reform efforts often overlook the alignment between pedagogy and assessment. Without integrated communicative testing, CLT becomes performative rather than transformative. Teachers’ frustration with this misalignment reflects what (Shohamy 2001) terms the “power of tests” the ability of assessment systems to dictate curriculum and pedagogy irrespective of policy intentions.

Moreover, teachers’ voices suggest a growing awareness of the need for balance. Several participants advocated for incremental change, such as including oral components or project-based tasks in assessment. This pragmatic orientation indicates that teachers are not resistant to CLT but are constrained by systemic structures. Their insights highlight the importance of teacher agency in shaping reform: sustainable change requires that teachers be partners, not passive implementers, in policy transformation.

The study’s final research question addressed how English pedagogy in Bangladesh can evolve to reconcile examination requirements with communicative goals. Teachers overwhelmingly supported reform but emphasized feasibility and contextual sensitivity. They proposed measures such as revising the SSC assessment to include listening and speaking components, reducing class sizes, enhancing teacher training, and providing access to interactive materials. These suggestions echo the recommendations of previous scholars (Hamid & Honan, 2012; Rahman, 2019), who argue that reform must integrate assessment with communicative pedagogy. The key lies not in abandoning examinations but in redefining what they measure. By incorporating performance-based tasks and formative assessments, examinations can generate positive washback, motivating both teachers and learners to engage in communicative practices (Bailey, 1999).

In addition, reform should address teacher’ professional development. Many participants reported a limited understanding of how to implement CLT within exam-focused contexts. Continuous, practice-based training can help teachers bridge this gap by developing strategies that align communicative learning with test preparation. Furthermore, parent engagement programmes could help reshape community perceptions, encouraging a shift from grade-based to skill-based definitions of success. Ultimately, reform efforts must be systemic rather than superficial. Introducing communicative elements into assessment without addressing institutional pressures, large class sizes, or outdated resources would yield limited impact. A sustainable approach requires coordination among policymakers, teachers, exam boards, and communities to create a culture where communicative competence is both valued and rewarded.

The discussion demonstrates that Bangladesh’s examination-oriented education system exerts profound influences English language teaching and learning. Rooted in historical, socioeconomic, and policy-driven factors, this system shapes stakeholder perceptions, classroom practices, and learner motivation in ways that restrict communicative development. While the adoption of CLT in policy represents progress, its impact remains curtailed by an assessment regime that privileges form over function. By situating these findings within Washback Theory and Sociocultural Theory, the study reveals that examinations not only determine pedagogical content but also mediate the social meanings of success and competence. Achieving a balance between examination accountability and communicative goals demands coordinated reform that integrates assessment with pedagogy, empowers teachers, and reshapes public expectations. Only then can English in Bangladesh move beyond being a foreign language for examinations to become a functional language for communication.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how an examination-oriented approach shapes English language teaching and learning practices in Bangladeshi secondary schools. Drawing on the perspectives of students, teachers, and parents, five interrelated questions concerning the influence of examinations, stakeholder perceptions, motivational consequences, tensions between communicative language teaching (CLT) and assessment practices, and possible reforms for balancing examinations with communicative competence are investigated. The use of qualitative methods, principally in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, illuminated the complex social and pedagogical realities underpinning English education in Bangladesh. The findings reveal a deeply entrenched examination culture that governs nearly every aspect of English learning. Both students and teachers operate within a system that rewards memorization and accuracy rather than communicative ability. Despite curricular intentions to promote CLT, assessment practices remain overwhelmingly focused on reading and writing, thereby excluding the oral and aural skills central to communicative proficiency. Moreover, parents tend to reinforce this examination orientation, equating high test scores with success and future opportunity.

Three central insights emerge from the study. First, the persistence of negative washback demonstrates that examinations not only influence teaching but also define it. Teachers’ instructional choices are largely constrained by the need to prepare students for the secondary school certificate (SSC) examination, leaving little room for interactional or creative activities. This aligns with earlier observations by (Hamid and Baldauf 2008) and (Sultana (2019), who identified assessment as the single most powerful determinant of classroom practice. Second, the study highlights the psychological and motivational consequences of this culture. Students approach English with instrumental rather than integrative motivation, seeing it as a requirement for

progression rather than a medium for expression. This reduces confidence in real-life communication and perpetuates anxiety around language use. These findings reaffirm the argument that affective factors, not merely instructional methods, determine communicative development (Dörnyei, 2005). Third, there is a profound disjunction between policy and practice. While the National Curriculum endorses CLT, the examination system evaluates traditional linguistic knowledge. Teachers, therefore, must navigate conflicting demands teaching for communicative competence while ensuring examination success. The outcome is a hybrid pedagogy that superficially adopts CLT terminology but remains structurally grammar-based.

To address these challenges, reform must focus on assessment alignment and teacher empowerment. Examinations should incorporate listening and speaking components, enabling positive washback that motivates both teachers and students to engage in authentic communication. Teacher-training initiatives should go beyond theoretical orientations and provide practical strategies for integrating communicative tasks within exam-driven settings. Furthermore, public awareness campaigns could help reshape parental expectations by promoting communicative competence as a marker of genuine proficiency. Sustainable improvement also requires systemic support, adequate resources, smaller class sizes, and institutional recognition of teachers' professional agency.

The study concludes that Bangladesh's English education system remains trapped between reform rhetoric and assessment reality. The dominance of examination-driven practices sustains English as a foreign language for passing tests rather than a living language for communication. Overcoming this divide demands coordinated action at multiple levels of policy, pedagogy, and perception. Only through an integrated approach that balances accountability with authentic learning can English education in Bangladesh realize its transformative potential. In essence, meaningful progress lies not in rejecting examinations but in reimagining them as tools that inspire learning rather than confining it. If such change can be achieved, English in Bangladesh may ultimately evolve from an instrument of evaluation into a medium of connection, creativity, and empowerment.

Recommendations

The findings of our study highlight the urgent need to realign English language teaching and assessment practices in Bangladesh with communicative goals. The following recommendations are proposed to guide policymakers, educators, and stakeholders toward more balanced and effective language education.

Reform of Assessment Practices: The current examination system should be redesigned to evaluate all four language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading, and writing rather than focusing solely on written performance. Introducing oral and interactive assessment components would generate positive washback, encouraging teachers and learners to engage in meaningful communication.

Strengthening Teacher Professional Development: Teachers require sustained, practice-oriented professional training that connects communicative language teaching (CLT) principles with classroom realities. Workshops should focus on lesson planning, formative assessment, and classroom interaction strategies that integrate communicative tasks even within exam-based contexts.

Curriculum and Material Revision: The National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) should review textbooks and teaching materials to ensure that they promote authentic language use. Supplementary resources, including listening materials, role-play tasks, and project-based activities, would help develop practical competence.

Stakeholder Awareness and Collaboration: Parents, school administrators, and communities need to be sensitized to the broader aims of English education. Awareness programmes could redefine success in terms of communicative competence rather than examination scores, reducing social pressure on rote learning.

Policy Integration and Systemic Support: Effective reform demands coherence between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment. Smaller class sizes, access to teaching aids, and institutional recognition of teacher agency are essential for sustaining long-term change.

Through these measures, English education in Bangladesh can progress from an examination-oriented culture towards a communicative, learner-centred model that genuinely prepares students for participation in a global linguistic environment.

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