

## **“Read-Like-a Writer” Approach to Teaching Writing**

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### **Abstract**

There is a widespread recognition that writing is a process which involves several steps in creating a piece of writing. According to Silva (1990, p. 15), the process-oriented approach needs step by step developments. As far as the researchers have concerned that reading and writing have a mutual relationship. Reading builds the diverse kinds of knowledge to write on; writing reinforces knowledge in a way that builds schemata to read with. Reading and writing interact with each other, possibly making use of same cognitive structure to create a text world (Kucer, 1985, p. 106). Many writing classes begin with the reading text, analyzing them, looking at them as models for writing as using them as a piece of communication to response. Reading plays a decisive role in the development of writing ability. So, reading appears to be as an essential pre-condition to produce a good writing. This study is a try to investigate that, Steve Peha’s ‘read-like-a-writer’ approach may be essential for the Bangladeshi learners to teach integrated reading and writing courses. This study is based on original data regarding students’ essay writings and the common problems in writing have been obtained by using document analysis and questionnaire responses.

**Keywords:** Teaching writing, Process approach, read-like-a writer approach, EFL.

### **Introduction**

Unlike speaking, writing is not an innate skill or capacity. It is a technology that has to be learned (Tribble, 2003, p. 1). Students will have an organized, coherent and error-free writing in English has always been the lifelong dream and ambition of all EFL teachers. In EFL context like Bangladesh, students consider English is a subject, not a language. When students join in the university, they fail to show their expected competency in writing in English. Hedge (1998, quoted from Tuan, 2012, p. 1) declares that writing skill was often relegated to the ‘status’ of ‘homework’ due to the limitation of time and syllabus outcomes, thus having no effects on the

possibility of the teacher's guide. Students' English proficiency is measured through written exam, and the students' spend a long time in English writing, this writing, in reality, is limited to some selected items to answer for instance paragraph, essay, and letter writing etc. For this reason, students sometimes try to memorize selected items collecting from popular notebook, another reason is that teachers always give feedback merely underlining the mistakes and errors hardly provide any constructive comment for the correct writings and sometimes they do not give any feedback regarding students' writings and the teachers are also traditionally preoccupied mostly with the dominant sense of grammatical accuracy rather than the development of ideas (Khan & Akhter, 2011, p. 6). Writing is to be learned not a reproduction of the teachers' examples. The teacher's role should be nondirective, facilitate, and they will assist the learners to express learners' meanings through an encouraging and supportive environment with minimum interference. Since the 1980s, there is a widespread recognition that writing is a process that involves several steps in creating a good piece of writing. According to Silva (1990, p. 15), the process-oriented approach needs step by step development, one of these is the integration of reading and writing. As far as it is known that reading and writing have a mutual effect. According to Kucher (1985) clarify that reading builds the knowledge of diverse kinds to write on or to employ in writing; writing reinforces knowledge in a way that builds schemata to read with (p.489). Reading and Writing communicate with each other and make the same cognitive structure to create a text world. So, an integrated skill in the classroom is an ideal environment to apply Steve Peha's "Read like a writer" as an integrated and parallel process of reading and writing.

This is an attempt to investigate that Steve Peha's "read like a writer" approach may be beneficial to EFL learners and thereby to bring off a better way to teach reading and writing courses through these questions:

1. What are the common problems students facing in the academic writing?
2. Will the application of Steve Peha's "Read like a writer" approach help students in writing through analyzing the reading activities in the pre-writing stage?

## **Literature Review**

### **i. Writing**

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Writing is a process, not a product. Also writing is a complex process of exploring writer's thoughts, discovering ideas and generating meaning (Flower and Hayes, 1981, p. 372). So, the writing process is a sharp tool to discover the meaning. A perfect piece of writing is enriched with thoughts and grammatical accuracy, as Nunan has confirmed; a complex, cognitive process that is required to sustain intellectual effort over a considerable period of time (1999, p.273).

## **ii. Influence of Reading on Writing**

The influence of reading on writing is seen when a reader tries to discover the meaning of a written text by using the words. It is common to consider reading and writing as the parallel processes of composing meaning drawing from a common pool of cognitive and linguistic strategies (Kucher, 1985, p. 317). The correlation between reading and writing proves that writers must also be readers and reading is a function of learning to write. Reading increases learners' ability to write and also helps them understand the processes of writing (Brown 1987, p. 331), "by reading or studying a variety of relevant types of text, students can gain important insights both about how they should write and about subject matter that may become the topic of their writing."

For these reasons, reading plays an enabling role to develop writing ability and reading appears to be an essential pre-condition to produce a good writing.

## **iii. The Read-like a Writer Approach**

According to Peha (2003, p.6), reading trait-based writing is a method for helping students to be strong writers because it explains the use of reading texts and also explains how writing works. The six characteristics most of the readers search for in any piece of writing are -- ideas (clarity, thought, support and detail), organization (internal structure), voice, word choice, sentence fluency (rhythm and flow) and conventions (mechanical correctness as well as the use of textual conventions) (Peha, 2003, p.6). The six-traits writing approach is based upon the philosophy of placing what can be gained by a reader from the writer's work.

## **Methodology**

### **A. Survey Questionnaire and Participants**

A questionnaire was designed to assess responses to close-ended questions. It was used to determine the students' and teachers' perceptions, attitude, needs, and the suggestions to improve the teaching and learning of academic essay writing performance. The completed questionnaire was analyzed using table and graphs. For the easy reference, the data is presented in the table form and the frequency and performance have been used to describe the findings. Questionnaires were given to 40 (22 female and 18 male) first semester students from the department of English of a private university in Dhaka, Bangladesh in the 2014-2015 academic session. Corresponding questionnaires were given to six teachers (three male and three female) from the department. All these teachers have more than four years of teaching experience.

## **B. Instruments**

### **Pretest**

The pretest was administered in the first week of the semester. The students were asked to write on the same topic for ninety minutes in the class. The aim of the pretest was to find out the proficiency level in English of the students before the test.

### **Posttest**

In the posttest, the students were asked to write an argumentative essay in ninety minutes after four weeks of learning essay writing. The purpose was to observe how the application of Steve Peha's 'read-like-a writer' approach helps students to improve their writing performance, and to what extent the use of this application is helpful in their writing.

### **Scoring**

The course instructor was requested to evaluate 40 writing papers on each topic, i.e. 80 essays in all, employing the same essay writing rubric. There are the six elements from Steve Peha's approach: organization, idea, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and convention. The voice criterion was omitted because it is very tough for the foreign language learners to recognize the author's voice. For that reason, the study considered only five criteria that are commonly mentioned in writing rubric 1) organization, 2) ideas, 3) word choice, 4) sentence

fluency and 5) convention. After that, the course instructor evaluated the scripts for scoring. The evaluation process lasted more than one month.

### C. Experimental Teaching

The course “Composition and Communication Skills” was taught to develop students’ writing ability. The syllabus was designed to cover all the requirements of all types of academic essays. The main course book “Writing Skills Hand Book” published by Houghton Mifflin, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. and “College Writing Skills” by John Langan, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. were followed and reading activities were added to help the students to increase their writing ability.

Steve Peha’s ‘read-like-a writer approach’ was followed in teaching essay writing in the class. According to the criteria of the approach such as organization, ideas, word choice, sentence fluency and convention were taught in the class for writing exploration.

During eight weeks of learning, students were taught the general knowledge about essay writing such as an introduction to the essay, and six basic academic types of essays. The first chapter was well taken care of because this was orientation chapter in which students were taught what to do and how to do throughout the course. Then pretest was taken after the students were taught carefully about essay writing. And from the third week, the application of Steve Peha’s ‘read-like-a writer approach’ was taught in the class. At the end of the course, post-test was taken.

## Results and Discussions

### A. Writing Test Results

Criteria based analysis of the writing tests

Sl no.	Criteria		Pretest	Posttest
1	Organization	Error in topic sentence	8(20%)	4(10%)
		Error in thesis statement	9(22.5%)	1(2.5%)
2	Ideas	Not having logical supporting details	9(22.5%)	1(2.5%)
		Cannot develop a	7(17.5%)	2(5%)

		conclusion		
3	Word choice	Lack of vocabulary	15(37.5%)	7(17.5%)
		Lexical error	10(25%)	5(12.5%)
4	Sentence fluency	Do not have unity and coherence	13(32.5%)	7(17.5%)
		Limited variety of sentence	21(52.5%)	10(25%)
5	Convention	Error in grammar	20(50%)	11(27.5%)
		Misspelling , inappropriate punctuation and capitalization	22(55%)	8(20%)

Table: 1.Criteria Based Analysis of Pretest and Posttest

### Analysis of Organization

In the pretest, eight students (20%) could not write the topic sentence properly, and nine students (22.5%) had the problem with thesis statement of the assigned topic. In the posttest, only 4 (10%) could not write the topic sentence, and 1(2.5%) could not write the thesis statement. It means that the students get a marginal improvement in the organization of the writing essay.

### Analysis of Ideas

In the pretest, nine students (22.5%) did not have the supportive logic details in their essay writing and seven (17.5%) students could not develop a conclusion of a given topic. Nevertheless, students made a dramatic change in the posttest, only one student did not have the logical and supportive details, and two students could not narrow down the topic in the class.

### Analysis of Word Choice

The ability to choose appropriate words in their writing in the pretest also indicated that students were not good to use the simple basic vocabulary that they already knew. So, they were not rich in vocabulary. 15 students they used the same vocabularies in their essay repeatedly. After eight weeks, it was possible to say that studying the application of Steve Peha's 'read-like-a writer' approach in learning writing in the posttest, only seven students used the simple vocabularies and for the lexical error. On the other hand, in the pretest, 10 students had lexical

errors, such as, lack of exposure to the target language, code switching and the interference of L1. In the posttest, only five students had the problem.

In the posttest, students had some improvements in word choice for essay writing. It reveals that the application of ‘read-like-a writer’ works effectively in the integrated reading-writing classroom.

### **Analysis of Sentence Fluency**

In the study of sentence fluency, 32.5% students did not have the unity among the sentences and had the unnatural linking. Also, 52.5% students did not have the ability to use varied sentence structure; instead they used basic, simple and short sentences that made their writing unsmooth and incoherent.

Again in the posttest, there were only seven students who did not know how to link the sentences. That means 6% (13%-7%) students whose mistakes decreased. For the limited variety of sentences, 10 students did not have the variety of sentences in their writing. So, the students who could merely use a limited range of sentences considerably decreased.

### **Analysis of Convention**

Some of the students who had errors in grammar are high in the pretest; 20 students and also 22 students with the error in spelling, inappropriate punctuation, and capitalization.

In a nutshell, this analysis shows that in the pretest, the students seemed to struggle with their performances. The posttest scores indicate a significant change in the class. In the posttest, students had some improvements on the every criterion of a well formed essay from the perspective of Steve Peha’s ‘read like a writer’ approach. Most of them wrote better in the posttest because they read more during the course.

## **B. Responses from Questionnaires**

### **Importance of Writing**

Writing is one of the basic language skills. Question1. Why do you think writing is important? This question was asked to know the teachers' and students' perceptions to the importance of the academic essay writing (see Table 2).

Reasons	Students' responses Total check %	Teachers' responses Total check %
Evaluate students' English proficiency	2 5%	1 16.6%
Be essential for the future careers	10 25%	2 33.3%
Assist other English skills	9 20.2%	2 33.3%
Improve knowledge application	3 7.5%	1 16.6%
Reinforce grammar and enrich vocabulary	15 37.5	2 33.3%

Table 2: Reasons why an academic writing is important.

Table 2 shows that most of the students, 37.5% believe that writing helps them to reinforce grammar and increase vocabulary and one-fourth of them (25%) realize for the future career. For the teachers, 33.3% of the teachers believe that writing reinforces grammar and vocabulary, and assists other skills. It is also essential for the future career. These are the three main reasons why writing is important.

### Students' Frequency of Writing Practice

Question 2 aims at finding out how often students practice writing outside of the class. There are, however, certain purposes for which those students wrote in English at home. The information in table 3 below shows the percentages and frequency of the purposes the students write for:

Sl. No.	Purposes	Very often	Often	Sometimes	Total
I.	For Pleasure	0%	2.5%(1)	5%(2)	7.5%(3)
II.	To express your feelings/ emotions	0%	25%(10)	5%(2)	30%(12)



III.	For correspondence	7.3%(3)	15%(6)	37.5(15)	50%(20)
IV.	To take part in some competitions	0%	0%	0%	0%
V.	To organize your work	0%	2.5%(1)	25%(10)	27.5%(11)
VI.	Another (Please Specify)	0%	0%	0%	0%

Table 3. Purpose and frequency of a non-academic writing

Table 3 indicates, 50% of the students, as it is clear in the table above, wrote in English frequently at home for the purpose of correspondence. 27.5% of the students write in English frequently to organize their work. 7.5% of the students write in English frequently for pleasure. 30% of the students write in English frequently to express their feelings or emotions. However, none of the students (0%) write in English to take part in some competitions or for other purposes.

The students primarily write in English in a non-academic setting for the purpose of correspondence, to organize their work. Pleasure and expression of emotions, which mainly associated with creative writing, are found less frequently in the non-academic writing. Thus, writing in English in non-academic setting serve as a transactional function.

### **Students' Abilities in Writing**

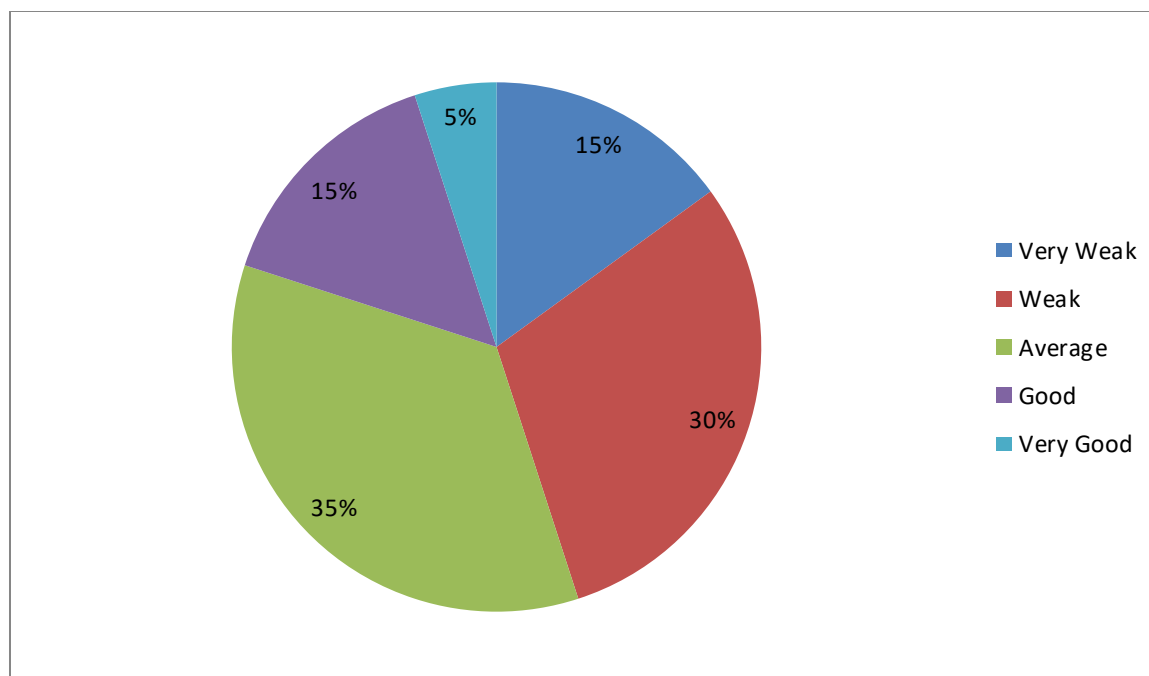


Figure 1. Difficulty level of essay writing

Figure 1 presents the findings for the teachers' perceptions of their students' proficiency in the academic writings based on their evaluation of students' class performance and written assignments. Teachers' perceived majority (40%) are average, a few (5%) are very good and the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest (30%) students are weak in every kind academic writings.

### Criteria of a Well-formed Essay

Figure 2 is the answers to the question 4. The criteria of a well-formed essay and these measure how good an essay occurs.

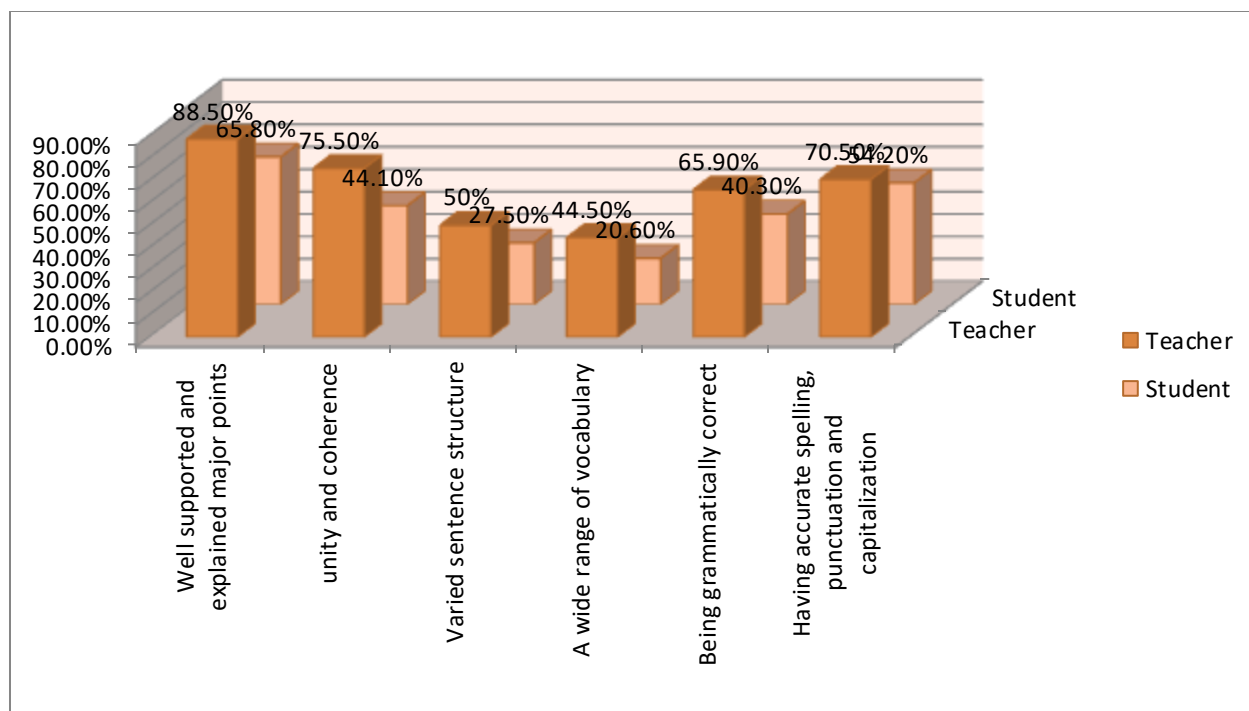


Figure: 2 Teachers' and students' responses to the criteria of a well-formed essay.

The teachers and students were asked to rank on the important aspects of the academic essay writing criterion that students should display in their essay writings. Six options were given to the teachers and students to list according to the importance.

'Well supported and explained major points' is considered the most important criterion of a well-formed essay (88.5% teachers and 65.8% students rank it the first). The second highest percentage of the teachers (75.5%) believes that 'unity and coherence' is important criterion should be displayed in students' essay and also 44.1% students think so. The third highest percentage of the teachers 70.5% and 54.2% students believe students' essay should be in correct spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Then, 65.9% of the teachers and 40.3% students believe that students should present their essay with correct grammar.

### **Degree of Difficulties Encountered by the Students**

Question 5 illustrated by Figure 3 helps to come up with the difficulties encountered by the students.

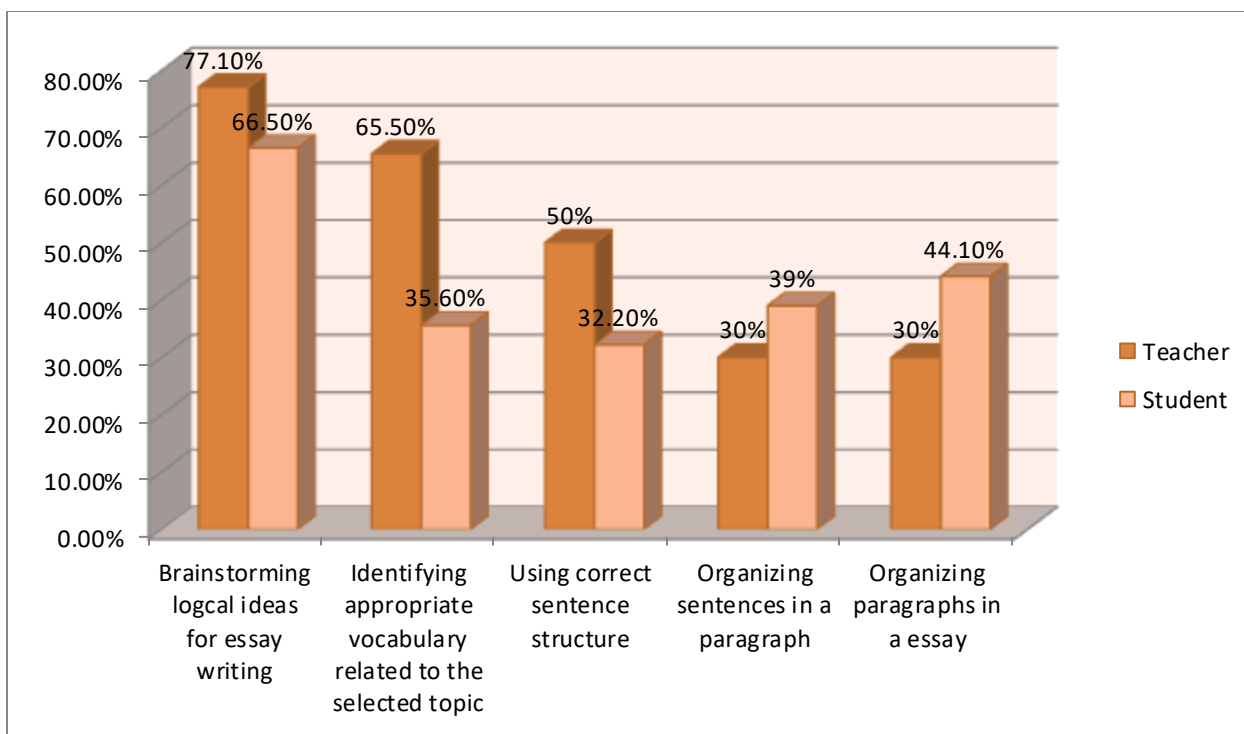


Figure 3: The degree difficulties responded by teachers and students in essay writing.

‘Brainstorming logical ideas for essay writing’ is considered the most difficult by 77.1% of the teachers and 66.5% of the students because at this stage, the students are supposed to generate ideas to convince their readers. The second highest percentages of teachers (65.5%) believe that identifying an appropriate vocabulary related to the selected topic and 35.6% students also think so. Then 50% of the teachers believe that using correct sentence structure also difficult for the students and 32.2% students also feel difficulties in essay writing. Students also face problem in organizing sentences in a paragraph and an essay.

### Reasons Why the Students are not Good at Writing

Question 6 in Figure 4 aims to identify why students are not good at writing.

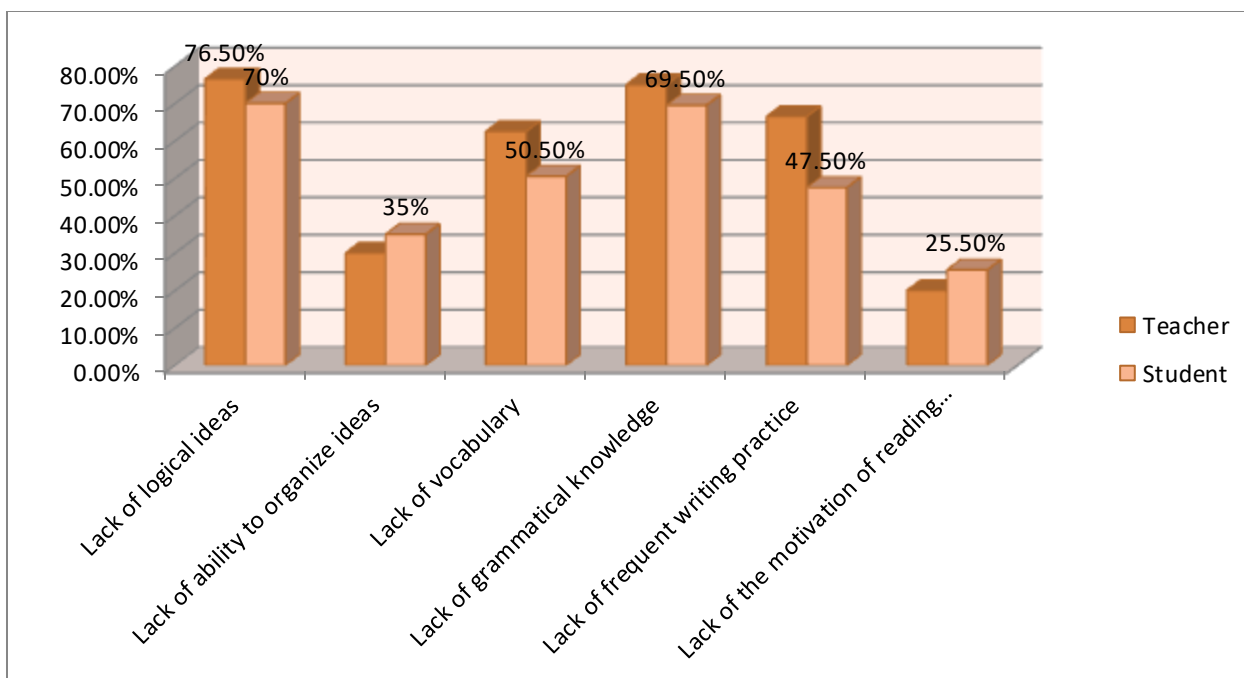


Figure 4: Reasons responded by the teachers and students why students are not good at essay writing.

‘Lack of logical ideas,’ ‘lack of grammatical knowledge,’ ‘lack of vocabulary,’ ‘lack of frequent writing practice’ and ‘lack of motivation of reading English material’ were considered the most common reasons for students’ failure to gain competence in writing.

### **Suggestions to Improve the Teaching and Learning of Writing**

Question 7 as shown in Figure 5 gives suggestions to improve students’ writings

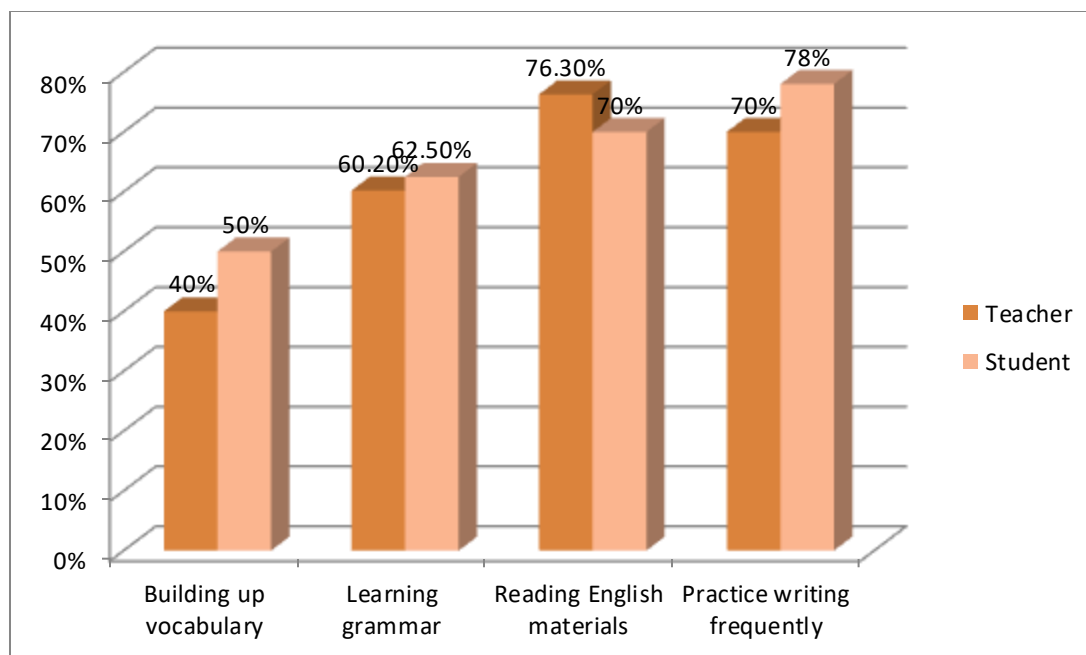


Figure 5: Suggestions to improve the teaching and learning of writing.

‘Reading, English Materials’ is recommended by 76.3% of the teachers and 70% of the students, because, teachers and students both feel, the usefulness of reading English helps the students to enrich their vocabulary and give ideas for writing.

‘Practice writing frequently’ is proposed by 70% of the teachers and 78% of the students as a way to improve students’ papers. Teachers of the tertiary level may consider the self study, practicing writing by themselves outside of the class.

‘Learning grammar’ is supported by 60.2% of the teachers and by 62.5% students as the grammatical incompetence is considered the most common reason affecting the students’ writings.

### Suggestions to Teachers

Figure 6 proposes what the teachers should do to improve students’ writing competence.

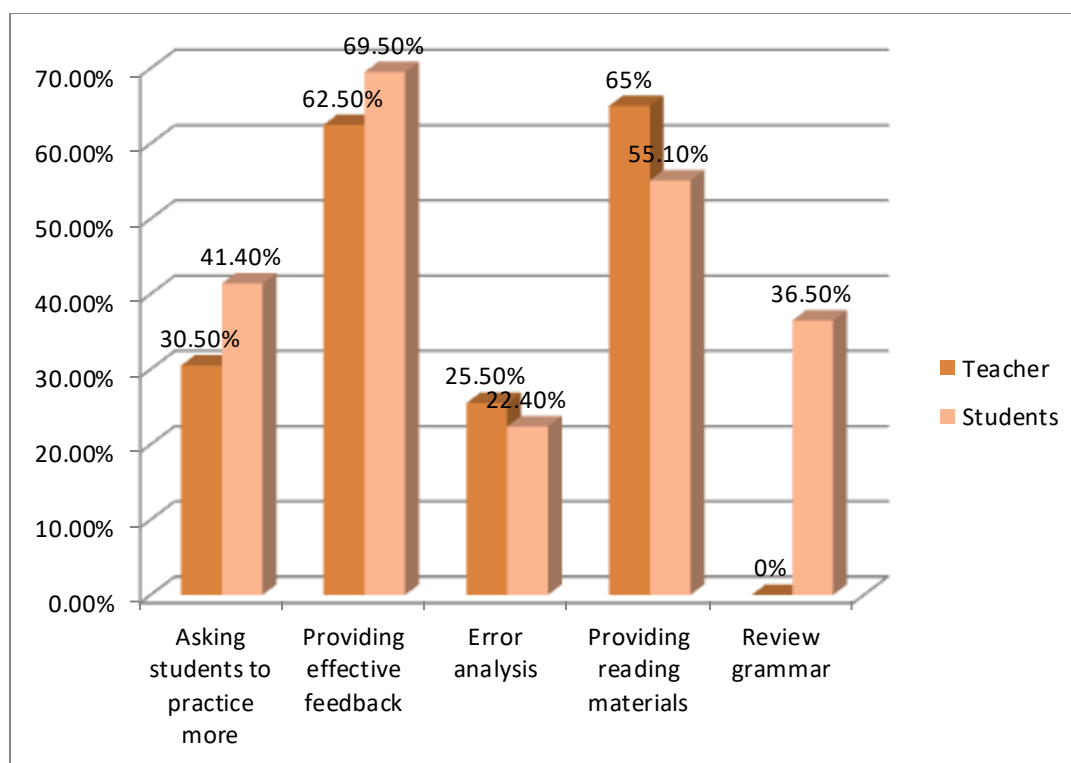


Figure 6: Teachers' and Students' suggestions to the teachers to improve their students' learning writing.

'Providing reading materials' is proposed by 65% of the teachers and 55.1% students to improve students' writings. Both the students and the teachers find the usefulness of analyzing the model essays to enhance their writing as students are the novice writers.

'Asking students to practice writing more' is recommended by 30.5% of the teachers and 41.4% of the students; as the students suggest this to compensate for their lack of skills for self-study.

'Providing effective feedback' is recommended by 62.5% of the teachers and 69.5% of the students. In giving feedback, teachers may explain why certain constructions are ungrammatical. Teachers should encourage their students to write by providing constructive comments and helpful criticism.

'Review grammar' is suggested by 36.5% of the students. However, none of the teachers propose it as for the tertiary level students reviewing grammar is their own duty.

## VI. Concluding Remarks

The conclusion is drawn from the writing test of the students and the questionnaire analysis of the teachers' and students' responses towards the problem facing the first year students of a private university of Bangladesh in writing essays. It shows that 'read-like-a writer' approach does not benefit students of higher level as much as it does with the students of the lower level. It is expected that this investigation will help the teachers to develop their teaching methods, aids and materials according to the students' needs. The major limitation of this study is, the research has been done in only one private university. If this survey can be done in more universities, then more reliable findings can be obtained. So, this study cannot be generalized to all the Bangladeshi tertiary level students.

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