What Happens When an Exam-Oriented Country Announces Auto-Pass Grading: Impacts of the Exclusion of 2021 SSC English in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Though dedicated research on the impact of Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exams exists, a curveball was thrown into the situation in 2020 following COVID-19. Resultantly, 2020 and 2021 saw the removal of the SSC English paper exams, the consequences of which could be immediate and far-reaching simultaneously. In that light, this paper tries to fill the research gap by exploring how the exclusion of the SSC 2021 English exam has impacted the auto-passed students in terms of their learning (or lack thereof), the amount and quality of preparation, and the aftereffects they faced as college students. To explore this issue, this qualitative study uses semi-structured interviews with six SSC 2021 examinees. Results show a significant lack of English learning due to a lack of exam incentives. Next, those who received a lower grade were unhappy with their auto-pass grades. Finally, some examinees with less developed English skills had trouble understanding lectures at college. Implications of this study suggest teachers and the administration to be considerate towards SSC 2021 examinees, many of whom may require hands-on aid to cope with current studies after skipping the SSC 2021 English exam.

Keywords: High-stakes exam, auto-pass grades, SSC English, testing and assessment, impact of COVID-19 on learning English as a foreign language

Introduction

Like uncountable issues caused by COVID-19, the pandemic also wreaked havoc on the Bangladeshi education system. One particular educational issue was the lack of the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) exams in 2020, and the subsequent trimming of it in 2021. In Bangladesh, the SSC exam is an extremely high-stakes exam as students' entire career trajectories depend on it (Sultana, 2018). Upon completing the SSC exam, Bangladeshi students enter college and prepare for the next big high-stakes exam, the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exam, which they typically take two years later. Needless to say, the exclusion of the SSC 2021 exam had drastic effects on HSC 2023 candidates. This study thus explores the impacts caused by the void of the canceled SSC English exam in the year 2021 in Bangladesh. In particular, the following two impacts will be examined: students' preparation, or lack thereof, for the canceled SSC exam in 2021, and how this exam void was affecting them in their college English classes—for their HSC 2023 preparation—afterward.

Academics and researchers are becoming increasingly concerned about the expanding influence of tests or assessments on stakeholders, society, and educational policy. Bangladesh in particular is an exam-oriented country, with several high-stakes exams at the secondary and higher secondary level. More burdens added to the situation came in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic which has had massive implications on education systems and pedagogical techniques around the globe, leading to the near-total shutdown of schools, colleges, and universities for months on end. To safeguard people from the spread of COVID-19, most countries opted for their educational institutes to be temporarily closed (Shohel et al., 2022). As a result, according to a report by UNICEF, (2021), the number of students affected by school closures were around 888 million. Thus, if the worldwide effect has been so drastic, one can only imagine what a developing nation like Bangladesh fared in the context of the lack of the high-stakes exam, SSC 2021, in the middle of the pandemic.

Literature Review

This section of the paper examines the role and significance of high-stakes English language testing in increasing learners' ability in using English. It discusses the impact of COVID-19 on language assessment in general. Furthermore, it discusses the changes that the Bangladesh curriculum made in the field of teaching and testing the English language during the pandemic. Overall, this section provides an overview of the implications of the online SSC English classes in Bangladesh, especially focusing on the lack of the SSC exam in assessment—which may have a significant impact on learners' perceptions of learning objectives, the auto-pass grade, and students' perspectives on their immediate future due to the novel situation.

High-Stakes Exams and English Subject Test Design of Bangladesh

High-stakes assessment, as defined by Nikmard et al. (2023), is a kind of evaluation that holds students, teachers, administrations, and the entire educational system responsible for a student's performance. These tests are sometimes referred to as standardized assessments since they serve as a tool for educational institutions to make high-stakes decisions (Islam et al., 2021). In particular, the high-stakes examinations in Bangladesh are the Primary Education Completion Certificate (PECE) at the end of the 5th grade, the Junior Secondary Certificate (JSC) at the end of the 8th grade, the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) at the end of the 10th grade, and the Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) at the end of the 12th grade. In this regard, the educational board's public examinations in Bangladesh are standardized high-stakes assessments, because the results of these tests determine which educational stream—among science, commerce, and humanities—the students will be selected in, during the commencement of their college years.

Despite the fact that language testing was once regarded to be secondary to teaching, many educators now regard language examinations as a medium for establishing pedagogy and its implications (Ali, et al., 2020). Alderson and Wall's (1993) research on test impacts established 15 hypotheses focusing on the influence of tests on teachers and students, the content, methods, degree, depth, and teaching and learning attitude. Essentially, more important examinations—for example, high stakes exams like the HSC exam—contain significant influence, while less importance is put on examinations with lower stakes like progress tests. In addition, Loughlin (2023) claims that instead of tests being a motivational element, it has become the principal of pedagogy. One can also relate this to the overwhelming focus on acing exams rather than genuine knowledge retention in the context of Bangladesh.

When it comes to the impact of tests, according to critical language testing scholars, high-stakes tests should be thoroughly investigated so that "the uses, misuses, and consequences of tests in education and society" (Shohamy, 2001) can be identified. Therefore, designing a language test is a complex task. When creating a language test, the purpose, goals, and objectives must be established so that the test is beneficial to the test takers (Owan et al., 2023). High-stakes assessments such as the JSC, SSC, and HSC—all of which incorporate English as a mandatory subject—have existed in Bangladesh for many years. Yet, no adequate study has been undertaken to investigate the test design, rationales, or interpretation of its validation (Ali et al., 2020). Regrettable indeed is the case that each year the authority's neglect and complacency are toying with the futures of millions of students in this country.
Not to mention, out of the four English language skills, only reading and writing are tested in the board examination. In addition, the question paper lacks content validity—some items

require memorization and also some questions are directly taken from the textbook or prescribed guidebooks—resulting in students not being required to read the passages and use reading sub-skills to answer them (Sultana, 2018). Thus, the reliance on memorization over communicative skill usage hampers content validity and lowers English standards (Das et al., 2014).

In particular, Smith and Rottenberg (1991) notice six negative outcomes of high-stakes exams: 1) completing the academic instruction in a short time; (2) shortening the curriculum while making a test; (3) restricting learners' learning scope; (4) influencing teacher morale; (5) evaluating lower-order skills; (6) pressuring students mentally. Moreover, Utami's (2022) findings imply that students' motivation, feelings, perceptions, and attitudes toward English language learning are influenced by exams. Furthermore, Dong's (2020) study indicates that students' test preparation and test performance affect their curiosity about learning. Finally, the findings of Desalegn et al. (2023) indicate a direct connection between the attitudes of students in terms of exam-related learning.

COVID-19 and Language Assessment Worldwide

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted educators and policymakers worldwide to bring fundamental changes. One such realm of change which is very much relevant to the exam-oriented Bangladeshi context as well as globally to some extent is language assessment. All of a sudden, students and teachers had to shift completely—or at least to a great extent—from the offline mode to an online one, resulting in sudden innovative assessment practices. Classes started being given via video conferencing software and facilities like Zoom and Google Meet, leading to an unforeseen but welcome rise in digital literacy (Yu, 2022).

In an international study on 250 universities and 310 teachers, Koris and Pál (2021) give a broad picture of the nature of online assessment during the pandemic. According to one participant, she quit being a policeman after being annoyed at proctoring online exams. This brought up the fallacy of online assessment trying to replicate traditional offline assessments by simply shifting the mode. As online proctored exams faced no end of issues like relentless cheating and unstable network connection, online assessments started becoming more formative than summative (Koris & Pál, 2021). The authors added that for conducting online tasks and instructing the learners to perform various tasks, language teachers used activities like breakout classrooms, online learning journals, open-book exams, e-portfolios, creative writing, and online presentations. However, the effectiveness of these online classroom activities has not been overall satisfactory (Afrin, 2020; Arora & Srinivasan, 2020). Finally,

there is a need to discuss what steps the Bangladeshi education system took during the pandemic.

Reformed Policy of High-Stakes Exams amidst the Pandemic in Bangladesh

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the whole education system in Bangladesh, besides some small reprieves in the middle, remained closed from March of 2020 to the beginning of 2022 (bdnews24.com, 2022). On top of that, the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) of Bangladesh decided that there would be no SSC exam in 2020. NCTB implemented online classes and alternative assessments for the SSC and HSC candidates, and as per subsection 2A of the alternative amendment of ordinance no. XXXIII of 1961[1], the syllabus was shortened and the English subject was on the whole exempted from the sit-in high-stakes test.

Thus, a state-mandated new syllabus of 60 days was prepared and published for the candidates. Additionally, the government declared a new Auto Pass Policy for the SSC examinees of 2021—including those of other high-stakes exams, PECE, JSC, and HSC—with the advice and suggestions of educational policymakers (Hassan, 2020). This decision was polarizing and attracted complaints from scholars and bureaucrats alike (Islam, 2021). Some experts recommended an alternative SSC exam which could be less rigorous than before, but still much better than the auto-promotion decision ("SSC, equivalent exams", 2021). Other educational experts expressed concerns about how the students would cope with their studies after not being assessed for almost two years. Expectations thus were that students would face difficulty in upholding their English standards due to the auto-pass situation and therefore face barriers in transitioning into their next academic levels (Islam, 2021). As explained, the test impacts were debilitative and overwhelming prior to the pandemic, and so there could be even worse consequences for the auto-passed SSC 2021 students in their college life.

Research Gap

Regardless of the existence of some research studies conducted in Bangladesh on the impact of the SSC exams, there is a lack of research on the auto-pass SSC 2021 situation because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, in particular, the absence of English high-stakes

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[1] "… if it is not possible to hold and conduct examinations at the end of the Intermediate and Secondary stage or any other stage thereof due to pandemic, epidemic, Act of God or for any other inevitable circumstances as determined by the government from time to time, the government may, by an order in the official Gazette, issue instructions for assessment and grant of certificates without holding and conducting examination or holding and conducting examination with short syllabus, in the manner prescribed in that Gazette, for the students in a particular year." (Lodge of Bangladesh, 1961)

exams in the years 2020 and 2021 had certain impacts on the SSC candidates regarding their preparation and current problems in college—the impacts of which have not been delved into. Taking these into consideration, this paper explores the inevitable consequences that auto-grade students were facing regarding the amount and quality of preparation for the canceled exam, and the impacts experienced at the college level.

Research Questions

The following research questions have been made for the study:

1. To what extent did the SSC 2021 examinees prepare for their SSC English exam?
2. What academic challenges, if any, did the SSC 2021 examinees face after they entered college (11-12th grades)?

Methodology

Research Design

In order to explore the research question of this study, an inductive qualitative approach was chosen. As the purpose of this research study was to recount, gather, and perceive, semi-structured interviews were chosen to find out the original scenario in depth, which is the goal of qualitative research (Creswell, 2012).

Participants of the Study

There were six participants chosen for this study—one male and five female students from Bangla medium background. The researchers thought that small size participants might be a sensible choice to deal with as long as a good volume of data could be gathered, and subsequent analysis could be ensured. The other important reasons for choosing them as participants were (a) they took the SSC exam in 2021, meaning they auto passed the English board exam in 2020, and (b) they were currently studying in college during the data collection time. In other words, all the participants were former SSC examinees and they had already started experiencing the impact of the auto-pass situation, especially in the English subject. Moreover, the participants received auto-pass grades based on their JSC 2018 exam results which included the English exam. Therefore, the participants' sentiments to this grading phenomenon were also explored. When the data was being collected, the participants were partaking in regular offline English classes in college, which means that they were probably affected by the two-year gap of traditional face-to-face classes during the COVID-19

pandemic. Since the main goal of this study was to find out the impact of the auto-pass situation on the English subject, the researcher carefully selected the participants who had gone through the aforementioned two phases.

Table 3.2: Participant Profile

Participant Pseudonym	Gender	Mainstream	Auto-Pass Grade in English
Mesba	Male	Humanities	A+
Peu	Female	Humanities	A+
Ikta	Female	Humanities	A-
Zavira	Female	Changed from Science to Commerce at HSC	A
Nafa	Female	Humanities	A+
Pitu	Female	Humanities	A

Data Collection Procedure

The interview questions were designed according to the two research questions. Specifically, 10 interview questions—besides elicitations of background information—were constructed with the aim of fully fleshing out the responses of the participants (see Appendix for the list of the interview questions). The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews and recorded the interview sessions through a video conferencing software called Zoom, which is a recorder software with the ability to keep the data impartial and objective (Ritchie et al., 2013). The entire interview taking process took approximately four days and each session took around fifteen minutes.

Data Analysis

This paper adapted Braun and Clarke's (2006) data analysis framework which consists of five stages: first, familiarization with the data by transcribing and checking the data again and again. It is important to sincerely reread the entire data to generate coding and search for meanings and patterns (Sgier, 2012). In the next three stages—generating the initial coding stage, defining and naming themes, and reviewing themes—the researcher proceeded with labeling

and organizing the qualitative data to identify and illustrate different themes and the relationships between them (Chamberlain, 2015). The final phase—producing the report which required roughly one week to complete—began with the researcher fully establishing the themes and subsequently writing the final analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Ethical Considerations

All the participants were well informed about the research purpose and they gave their consent to the researcher for their contribution to this research study. Every participant has been given pseudonyms so that their privacy is maintained. Additionally, the participants were allowed the privilege of keeping some information in the interview sessions discrete, such as sensitive or controversial opinions. However, this non-disclosure privilege was not used by any participant.

Findings

This section reflects and reviews the findings that had been extracted from the six interviews upon data analysis. The four subheadings below emerged from the themes produced from coding the interview data.

The More the Exam Preparation, the More the Improvement, the More the Satisfaction

In response to the first research question, almost all the participants, except for two, stated that they took preparation for the SSC exam for no less than 6 months. Especially for the English subject, three out of six did not stop their preparation even after the announcement of its exclusion from the SSC Syllabus. According to Ikta, she "took quite a good time to prepare for the English exam" before the announcement. Nafa claimed that even after the removal of the English subject, she "did not stop learning grammar." She further emphasized that the preparation "absolutely" improved her English language skills. Not only Nafa but also the other participants who took at least some preparation agreed in the statement that the English exam preparation had improved their English language skills. Thus, it was evident that, although the English papers were removed for the SSC 2021 examinees, some of the students did not stop their practice in English, and these students experienced perceived positive outcomes as discussed below.

In answer to the second research question—whether the discontinued English practice because of COVID-19 decreased their English language proficiency or not—those who received an A+ were quite positive. Peu asserted that her foundation in English was "quite good" and therefore "the auto-pass did not stop the development of the English proficiency level." Mesba agreed with Peu's statement and Nafa also claimed that as she persisted in English language learning throughout the pandemic, she stated that her "English is becoming stronger with regular practice." On the flip side, Zavira, Ikta, and Pitu—the three participants who did not receive an A+ in the English subject—felt that their English proficiency was lessening because of the lack of English practice for a long time. Pitu shared her experience regarding her deteriorating English skills: after about nine months of discontinued language classes, she felt she was "drowning in the ocean of frustration" as she was clueless without a guiding voice telling her what to study. Moreover, she realized she was unable to answer queries in English from juniors, and so she had to resort to browsing the internet and checking books and supplementary materials for solving the problems. This habit of looking elsewhere for a readymade answer had infiltrated her study pattern, as she tended to "[look] for solutions in the books or test papers and asked elder brothers which [she] did not normally face in regular offline classes."

Regarding the question of facing any trouble while doing English classes in college, the majority of the participants answered that they were not experiencing any problems. Peu revealed an interesting observation. She claimed that she used to face some problems at school due to some teachers' inadequate teaching skills, overall, less knowledge of the content, and lack of a charismatic teaching style of grabbing students' attention. However, according to her, she still had not faced any problems at the college level. In other words, rather than being negatively affected by the auto-pass situation, Peu was faring even better in her college English lessons due to the teachers' overall teaching skills and knowledge, as per her perception. However, Pitu lamented that they were having difficulties in "catching and keeping up with" the class lectures. Zavira also shared this sentiment. As for what steps the participants were taking nowadays to make up for their lack of exam preparation, all but one participant reported that they were doing coaching classes besides their regular college lessons. Only Ikta had not yet admitted herself to any coaching center, but even she expressed interest to join one, claiming she would likely do so soon.

Thus, the above findings clearly show that some students were victims of the auto-pass English result, and these students experienced academic problems because of a lack of proper preparation and influence.

Satisfaction Dependent on Auto-Pass Grades Based on Previous Grades

However, when the participants were asked whether they were satisfied with their auto-pass English grade or not, the researcher noticed that those who received A+ were satisfied and those who failed to obtain A+ were disappointed with their results. One of the main reasons behind it was that the English auto-pass result was based on their JSC 2018 English subject result. In other words, those who could not achieve A+ on JSC English did not receive A+ in the SSC no matter what was their preparation and perceived language development for the SSC.

Respectively, Zavira, Ikta, and Pitu—the three participants who did not secure A+ in English—claimed that as their JSC English subject results were not up to the mark, they put massive effort into the SSC English examination to do better. So, they believed they "could get an A+ if the exam was conducted on time" (Zavira). Unfortunately, redemption was not possible due to the auto-pass scenario.

Extensive Use of Supplementary Materials Prior to the Lockdown

Two interview questions were dedicated to determining whether the participants used supplementary materials or not when classes were still going on until the lockdown in March 2020, and whether they solely followed the teacher's instructions or also did self-study. All the participants said that they "extensively" (Zavira) used supplementary materials to perform well in the exam. According to Peu, she used supplements such as guides, test papers, suggestions, and also "the ones which were chosen by [her] home tutor and class teacher." Besides using supplementary materials, two participants—Mesba and Pitu—mentioned that they liked to do self-study. Mesba expressed that he could not but use supplements for practice as "they are instructed by the teachers," but "other than that, [he] like[d] to write things on [his] own."

Apart from the heavy usage of supplementary materials, the participants also stated that they had to follow teachers' instructions before they took any English examination. Peu gave a detailed example of how they were told to follow the guidance of their English teacher. She said that her teacher instructed some "specific model questions including paragraphs, dialogues, short stories, essays, grammar sections, broad questions to memorize, and also gave many handouts." The researcher observed that when answering the question all the participants had a matter-of-fact tone, as if it was normal for them to follow the teacher's guidance. Moreover, Zavira also thought that the handouts that the teacher provided "were easier and the grammatical rules were presented in shortcut ways."

However, both Peu and Mesba informed an interesting yet unusual matter which was that their home English tutors were already privy to the fact that the English subject was likely to be excluded from the SSC examination. This awareness of no English SSC exams prior to the government announcement resulted in Peu and Mesba not indulging in as much practice as they would if exams took place. In other words, though Peu practiced solving past question papers, the intensity and rigor were quite tame due to this awareness. More importantly, the earlier the participants knew that they would not have to give their SSC 2021 English exam, the earlier did their preparation for the exam stop.

Incentive for Learning Versus Grades

Whether or not the participants considered the SSC simply an ordeal for getting a certificate, regardless of the learning outcomes, was important. Thus, their views of the relative significance of learning and grades were taken in this study. When the participants were asked whether getting a higher grade in the English subject was more important than developing skills, the majority claimed that improving language skills was more important. Some participants stressed the importance of both skill learning and grades. Ikta expressed that "grades are not everything." According to her, if her skills are not up to the mark, then grades alone cannot do anything for her. She continued that, for her, an adequate skill in English and getting good grades were on equal levels of importance. Peu also viewed both grades and learning to be important for conforming to the expectations of parents, societal pressure, and the job sector. She also added that developing English skills as well as attaining good grades was important for the dual needs of communication and pursuing higher degrees abroad.

One intriguing opinion was shared by Pitu, whose answer was partially different from the other participants. Pitu also favored the importance of leaning over grades. However, she also felt that learning is boosted when there were grades involved. In other words, she thought if she studied only for learning, she would forget what she had learned. Unless it was a high-stakes test, Pitu believed that students might indeed learn and remember the content but would not thoroughly practice it enough for being able to perform exceedingly well in exams. Thus, according to her, a balanced motivation between developing English skills and simultaneously pursuing high grades not only ensures better grades but also leads to better knowledge retention. Learning, she added, only for getting good marks was also not a good practice. Many might suffer in the future as they would not remember what they had learned. That is why learning for gathering knowledge, and also for garnering good marks, is dually important in order to become "ideal language users in society" (Pitu).

Discussion

The previous section has presented and analyzed the results of the study. This present section provides a holistic discussion of the results and relates them to the research questions.

Quantity and Quality of Preparation Linked to Language Development

In answer to the first research question—to what amount the SSC 2021 examinees prepared for their SSC English exam—the findings of this study illustrated that apart from two participants, all the other respondents took preparation for the SSC exam for at least 6 months. Even after the cancellation of the English subject exam, three participants kept on practicing English. These students who kept on studying were experiencing positive outcomes because of their continuous practice. These findings are similar to Hounsome's (2023) findings. However, research conducted by Utami (2022) and Desalegn et al. (2023) portray different results compared to the present one. Their findings specify that students' test preparation and purpose influenced their learning; but the current study shows that half of the SSC 2021 examinees did not take preparation at all after the removal of the English subject from their syllabus. However, for those students who did not study, the blame is not entirely theirs but the closure of the school because of COVID-19. In fact, Mesba's language tutor informed him that there would likely be no English exam in 2021 prior to the official announcement. Thus, the fault for less preparation lies not wholly on the students. As Loughlin (2023) says, instead of being a motivational element, tests had become the primary principle of pedagogy, and so with the removal of the SSC exam, even some teachers stopped encouraging students to study.

Now that the quantity of SSC 2021 preparation has been discussed, it is also pertinent to discuss how the preparation was done. Apart from the English textbook, *English for Today*, common supplementary materials included past question papers and suggestions from teachers. In fact, no participant hesitated when revealing that their English teacher and tutor provided specific essays, paragraphs, grammatical rules, and other topic suggestions. Only one participant, Ikta, said that her English teacher tried teaching her all the syllabus topics. This reliance on exam paper suggestions is characteristic of the exam-obsessed country of Bangladesh. For instance, Al Amin and Greenwood's (2018) survey on 216 secondary school English teachers in Bangladesh expose the fact that 10% of teachers have the tendency to teach only the things likely to come in the exam and 30% of them do not even touch the rest of the less necessary portion. Furthermore, research in the same field conducted by a number of researchers (Al Amin & Greenwood, 2023; Alderson & Wall, 1993; Maniruzzaman & Hoque, 2010; Tsagari, 2011; Smith & Rottenberg, 1991) show that English teachers are

responsible for the students' inadequate proficiency over English as they heavily rely on supplements and instructions that are given to students for practicing purposes only. Moreover, students are taught lessons that are important only for examinations instead of improving their communicative competence.

As for the purpose of preparation, most students did not study extensively, at least after the announcement of the auto-pass situation was made. However, not all of them admitted that they only regarded grades more important than learning. This can be related to the fact that interviews cannot always extract true feelings from individuals if those feelings are matters that they do not want to acknowledge to strangers (Randall et al., 2009). Alternatively, it may indeed be true that most SSC 2021 examinees had ethical interests at heart of studying for increasing their English skills instead of simply toiling for grades. Yet another intriguing finding pointed to the fact that despite the participants' insistence on the value of learning, it was seen that only those students who score high in English anyway were more focused on learning, whereas students with generally poor English grades were more concerned about attaining good grades (Grades vs Learning, 2022).

Impacts of the Auto-Pass Situation

Regarding the second research question—the impacts of the auto-pass situation in the immediate future—a variety of responses were found, and the impacts are closely aligned to the answer to the first research question about the quantity and quality of preparation.

First, all the participants agreed that long-time discontinuation from studies can cause low proficiency in English. Those who were concerned about this maintained English practice while others did not. Resultantly, after admitting into college, those who regularly did English exercises were not facing any obstacles in understanding the teachers' lectures. On the other hand, those who did not practice much were having a harder time dealing with class lectures and understanding the overall lesson. The sole outlier, Peu, does not face any problems because of her already developed command of English. Other than that, the study supports the notion that if the students do not engage in regular English practice, their proficiency level will be comparatively low from the active ones (Hounsome, 2023).

One hypothesis, out of 15, mentioned by Alderson and Wall (1993) includes the notion that a test will impact the way students learn. However, besides the test, students' own language skills also play an important factor in their preparation, as this study found that for those who had the tendency to score high in English, the quantity and quality of preparation did not matter much when compared to struggling students for whom preparation was essential. The case in

point was Peu who did not take much preparation but who is not currently facing any issues in English classes. However, Pitu, Ikta, and Zavira were struggling students in English, and despite their preparation, they continue to face difficulties at college even until now. Pitu specifically mentioned that she faced confidence issues due to not being able to keep up with college lectures. She also had to resort to referring to textbooks and other sources when doing her English lessons, a phenomenon explored in the literature on Bangladeshi education (Al Amin & Greenwood, 2018; 2023).

A final point to add is that all the examinees were either already enrolled at English coaching centers or were at least planning on joining one soon. This supports Al Amin and Greenwood's (2018; 2023) finding about Bangladeshi students flocking to coaching centers to ensure an enhanced grade. With the onset of the pandemic and nearly two years of no in-person classes and the SSC 2021 English exam void, it comes as no surprise that coaching centers are now such increasingly popular avenues. Evidently, this may be genuinely helpful to close the distance between the auto-pass students and those who had to sit for the SSC English exam in prior years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, despite the absence of the SSC 2021 English exam, many examinees studied as the auto-pass declaration came late. As most students did not study English after the exam cancellation notice, those who had already taken preparation for their exam by then experienced positive washback, whereas those who did not take much preparation experienced negative washback. Moreover, the purpose of the preparation was connected to the English proficiency level of the students. Due to the long-term break from their studies, students tended to forget things they learned. Subsequently, students' language development, even as basic as comprehension skills, was prone to fade over the lack of the high-stakes exam. In this context, the statement made by the educational policy of Bangladesh was one of the reasons for the shortcoming of the SSC results. The education system received particularly severe backlash because of the auto-pass situation that they imposed on the candidates. Indeed, Ikta, one of the participants, claimed that she could have secured a good grade if the exam was taken following the usual syllabus at the usual time. The impact of this exam void is specifically significant for struggling students and those who sought redemption from their JSC English results. Even now, some of these students are in precarious conditions at college as their low comprehension levels are hampering them in understanding class lectures.

One limitation of this study is the lack of data triangulation. Other data collection sources such as pre- and post-tests could have been taken to gauge the actual impact of the lack of the SSC English exam in 2021. However, pre-tests were impossible as the study was conceptualized following the SSC 2021 exam. Indeed, as the auto-pass situation is an event of the past, little can be done besides ensuring that these auto-pass students receive special attention from college teachers and others so that whatever lacking incurred due to the washback is alleviated soon. If nothing else, at least awareness of this auto-pass condition and realization of its folly should be kept in mind by the education policymakers and also the general public so that any potential future policy for crisis learning is more well-informed and better implemented. Another shortcoming is that the sample size was small. Yet, this study being qualitative by nature, participants' in-depth responses and following analytical discussion could perhaps shed some light on the issue. Future researchers are encouraged to delve deeper with a bigger sample and data to reveal more insightful findings.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

Background Questions:
Name:
School:
Stream: Science/Commerce/Humanities

Educational Background:

No	RQ 1 (To what extent did the SSC 2021 examinees prepare for their SSC English exam)	RQ 2 (What impacts do the SSC 2021examinees think the auto-pass situation will have regarding their English language skills in the immediate future?)
1	For how long did you take preparation for the SSC exam? I mean, for all subjects, not only English.	
2	Did you take any preparation on the English subject before its exclusion from the syllabus? If yes, then how long did you prepare yourself for the English exam?	
3	[To those who took some preparation at least] Do you think taking preparation on the English subject has improved your English skill?	
4	Did you use supplementary materials (such as test papers, guide etc.) other than the textbook for preparation?	
5	Did your English teacher give any suggestion before any English examinations? Please give a detailed answer about any suggestions that your teacher gave you.	
6		Since you as well as other candidates of 2021 SSC 2021 have auto-passed, are you worried that your English skills have decreased due to lack of regular practice?

7		After getting admitted into the college, do you take additional tutoring/coaching classes for taking preparation for English tests?
8		Are you satisfied with your auto-pass grade on English subject? Why or why not?
9		Do you face any trouble while going English classes in your college? If yes, then please elaborate what the difficulties are that you face in the class. And if not, then why not?
10		Do you think getting a higher grade in the English subject is more important than developing your skill in English? Why or why not?