

The Impact of High stake EFL Tests on the role of Teachers, Learners and parents

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Abstract

This study explored the impact of high-stake tests on the instructional practice of teachers, the language practice of learners, and the actions of parents in the process of language learning. The study employed quantitative and qualitative methods of exploration. Questionnaire, in-depth interview, focus group discussion and classroom observation were used to generate data in the study process. The quantitative data were analysed using percentage and linear regression analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative data. The findings of the study showed that the nature and content of the high-stake tests profoundly influenced the instruction practice of teachers, the learning practice of learners and the role of parents to the effect of focusing on grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension at the expense of productive skills. The findings have strong theoretical and practical implications in language education assessment and utilization of teachers' and learners' energy for long term educational ends.

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Key terms: High stake test; Consequential validity; EFL instructional practice; parental role; Learning practices

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1. Introduction

It has long been recognized that testing is an integral component of instructional actions and decisions of educational practices. As such it tremendously determines the quality of educational outcomes in different ways (Messick, 1996; Shohamy et al., 1996). This influence of testing on educational outcomes is widely termed as consequential validity. This issue has been a subject of inquiry over the last three decades. At the centre of the discourse on this subject is that the content of tests, the way they are prepared and the stake attached to them determines the learning practices of learners and instructional actions and decisions of teachers. This also at large impacts the quantity and quality of outcomes coming out of educational programs.

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It is widely believed that these impacts of tests are so immense when tests carry higher stakes. Such tests widely known as high-stake tests are seen by students, teachers, administrators, parents, or the general public as the basis upon which important decisions are made that immediately and directly affect test takers. The influence of such tests on testees' life ranges from employment and promotion to placement and achievement.

This influence of the tests in turn has multidimensional consequences on various educational domains ranging from programme curricula to instructional methodology and learning practices. At curricular level, high stake examinations impose power in shaping the school curriculum based on the nature and type of the examination. Teachers are dictated to focus on linguistic areas which could appear in the examination. Thus, according to writers, there is the inherent danger of the test becoming the tail that wags the curriculum dog. If there is no concentrated effort to subordinate testing to explicit curricular goals, there is an ever-present potential danger that tests themselves with all their inherent limitations, will dominate and sometimes distort the whole curriculum (Taylor, 2005; Vernon, 1997)

Testing experts also claim that high stake examination affects the methodology teachers employ in the classroom; i.e. teachers are forced to design tailor-made activities which are directly related to the

examination preparation practices, technically termed as “coaching or cramming” for the examination (Alderson and Wall; 1993; Shepard; 1990; Wall, 1996). Further, where examination in question are of high stake, they exerts power to dictate the instructional materials into the exact copy of real examination papers (little more than clones of the past examination papers). This invites commercial publishers to produce textbooks that may influence the examination. Hence, teachers are not motivated to introduce their own materials to the course rather they prefer to consume commercial textbooks for their instructional purposes (Biggs, 1995; Cheng, 1997; Gipps, 1994; Hamp-Lyons, 1998).

Turning to the third effect of high stake tests, writers observe that these tests impinge on students’ learning and studying strategies. Particularly, they have the potential to divert students’ learning and studying strategies towards the nature and types of the examination to achieve good grades. That is, students are forced to be test-wise. They spend much of their time and energy in examining the content and nature of past tests and how to answer such tests. Sometimes they memorize model answers of the past examination (Crooks, 1988; Black and William, 1998).

Finally, it is important to note that, while the influence of high-stake tests is wide ranging, their effect may be positive or negative. At the same time, the type and magnitude of the impact varies across educational settings. This nature of high-stake tests requires a continual assessment of this complexities in any educational system. With this view in mind, the researcher takes on the investigation into these types of tests on various actors of language education in the Ethiopian education ecology.

2. The Study

This study has investigated the consequential validity of Ethiopian General Secondary Education Certificate English Examination (EGSECEE). This examination is one of the high-stake exams administered to students in this country. It serves as one of the bundle of tests used as a major benchmark to place students to technical colleges or pre-university preparatory schools. The educational decision made based on these exam scores has such a tremendous effect on the life of the students that failure in these exams prevents students from joining vocational trainings or long term university learning. Further, this ends their chance to get free vocational or university training for ever in this country. Thus, the tests carry strong stake which the students and parents value much.

These features of the tests inherently affect the different domains of educational processes outlined earlier. Yet this dimension of the tests has not been investigated adequately in this country. Of course, there are studies that examine these tests in different ways.

For example, Melkamu (2007) took the first initiative on investigating the washback effect of EGSEC Grade 10 English Examination. The researcher used checklist indices to compute the content validity of the examination. Besides, he employed questionnaires to examine teachers' and students' reactions towards the examination. His finding showed that the examination had negative impact on the perceptions of the teachers and the students. Apart from this, the examination was unable to represent the syllabi objectives, the content, and methods vis-à-vis appropriateness, coverage and relevance. Looking into the operationalization and the results of the study, one could see that this study did not directly and sufficiently explore the consequential validity of the tests.

The other studies (Kassa, 2007; Simachew, 2013) examined the Ethiopian Higher Education Entrance English Examination for Grade 12 (EHEECE), which is different from the General Secondary Education Certificate English Examination (GSECEE) administered to students in Grade 10. Further, these studies mainly investigated how much these examinations matched or mismatched with the content of the designed teaching materials (textbooks) vis-à-vis the intended objectives.

Nevertheless, the social ramifications /consequences of these examinations on different stakeholders (at micro and macro level) were not given appropriate attention so far. Similarly, how much these consequences were persistent and deleterious to various stakeholders were not treated as well. Indeed, intended or unintended consequences of these examinations on both short and long term impacts have not been investigated. Further, the studies did not address learner-related constructs. Particularly, little or no evidence is reported on the direct effect of such tests on students' learning practices and strategies.

Thus, this study is devoted to the exploration of these dimensions of the consequential validity of Ethiopian General Secondary Education Certificate English Examination(EGSCEE).

The following questions were formulated to guide the inquiry:

How does Ethiopian General Secondary Education Certificate English Examination (EGSCEE) influence the EFL teachers' instructional methodology?

What consequences does this examination have on the students' English learning practices and strategies?

What impact does the nature of this examination have on parents' actions towards their children education?

3. Materials and Methods

3.1 Research Design

The study employed a survey research design with a quantitative and qualitative tools. The rationale behind employing both quantitative and qualitative data is to further investigate the research problem by converging broad numeric trends from quantitative research and the detail of qualitative research.

3.2. Subjects of the study

This study took students, teachers, and parents as sources of data. One hundred and eighty students (15-17 years of age) were selected from four secondary schools through random sampling technique. Thirty English language teachers of these students were taken through comprehensive purposive sampling. Similarly, twenty-eight parents of these students were selected through snow-ball sampling technique. All these three segments of subjects were checked for their consent to get involved in the study.

3.3. Data Collection Instruments

The study employed questionnaires, in depth interview, focus group discussion (FGD), and document analysis and classroom observation. The questionnaires were administered to teachers, students and parents to explore their respective perceptions and practices of EGSECEE. Likewise, in-depth interviews were administered to teachers and parents to further investigate their perceptions and actions on this examination. The classroom observation was employed for examining the effect of EGSEC English Examination on the teaching and learning process. It was also used to observe classroom realities to see on which domains of teaching and learning this exam exerts significant influence. The focus group discussion, which was administered to students, was meant for

exploring the social, psychological and practical effect of EGSEC English Examination on their learning practices and strategies.

3.4. Methods of Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data analysis techniques were used in this study. The data generated through questionnaires and classroom observation were analysed quantitatively. Particularly, percentage and linear regression were employed to analyse these sets of data. On the other hand, the data obtained from the focus group discussion, in-depth interviews and unstructured classroom observation were analysed qualitatively.

3. Results

Table 1: Teachers' instructional practice as a reaction to the content and nature of exams.

| Instructional actions of teachers | Quantity and type of Contents of the syllabus ↓ → | **Grammatical structures | **Vocabulary | **Short dialogues | **Reading comprehension | extended peaking practice | Sentence/paragraph writing practice | Listening |
|------------------------------------|--|--------------------------|--------------|-------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------|
| | | | | | | | | |
| Time Budgeting | Pearson Correlation | 0.86 | 0.79 | 0.64 | 0.78 | -0.82 | -0.84 | -0.96 |
| | Beta weight (β) | 0.078 | 0.75 | 0.57 | 0.076 | 0.078 | 0.081 | 0.086 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.012 | 0.002 | 0.004 | 0.003 | 0.001 | 0.001 | 0.000 |
| | N | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 |
| Material choice | Pearson Correlation | 0.81 | 0.73 | 0.68 | 0.72 | -0.86 | -0.80 | -0.96 |
| | Beta weight (β) | 0.075 | 0.070 | 0.060 | 0.073 | 0.077 | 0.075 | 0.085 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.012 | 0.002 | 0.004 | 0.003 | 0.001 | 0.001 | 0.000 |
| | N | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 |
| Choice of Instructional Techniques | Pearson Correlation | 0.79 | 0.81 | 0.58 | 0.76 | -0.91 | -0.93 | -0.91 |
| | Beta weight (β) | 0.080 | 0.82 | 0.060 | 0.081 | 0.083 | 0.080 | 0.088 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.001 | 0.002 | 0.004 | 0.003 | 0.001 | 0.001 | 0.000 |
| | N | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 |
| | Beta weight (β) | 0.088 | 0.079 | 0.61 | 0.081 | 0.078 | 0.081 | 0.085 |
| | Sig. (2-tailed) | 0.001 | 0.01 | 0.004 | 0.003 | 0.001 | 0.002 | 0.001 |
| | N | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 | 30 |

** Contents dominantly appearing in EGSEEE

This table presents the teachers' instructional actions across the major contents of the English language syllabus for grade ten. This is meant to assess the degree of appropriateness and adequacy of the instructional actions employed in teaching the contents specified in the syllabus. This in effect is meant for identifying which contents of the syllabus are emphasised or deemphasised as a reflection of the impact of the nature and contents of the national certificate examination on the instruction practices of teachers. The table in the vertical column contains the instructional actions of teachers and the horizontal row has the contents of the syllabus. The degree of association between the instructional actions of the teachers and the nature and quantity of the contents of the syllabus is presented for each pair from the two groups. To determine this, the correlation coefficient and the beta value for the strength of the association has been computed.

Looking into the results, we can generally see a significant variation in the degree of association between the teachers' instructional actions and the type and quantity of contents of the syllabus. While there is a significantly strong positive association (match) between the instructional actions of teachers and those contents dominantly appearing in the national examination, this is not true for those components of the syllabus which have little or no space in the exam. For example, there is a strong association between the instructional actions of teachers and the nature and quantity of grammatical structures included in the syllabus. This is reflected in time allotment ($r, 0.86$; $\beta, 0.076$), the use of instructional techniques ($R, 0.79$; $\beta, 0.080$), and the material choice of teachers ($r, 0.81$; $\beta, 0.075$). This strong match is also true for vocabulary teaching across the instructional actions with the strongest association reflected in the use of instructional techniques for teaching this area of language ($r, 81$; $\beta, 0.082$).

Turning to the degree of association between the action of teachers and the type and quantity of content in the productive skills, the opposite picture is reflected. Evidencing this, a strong negative association was found out between instructional actions of the teachers and the quantity and nature of writing practices in the syllabus. This is true across the actions of the teachers from time allotment ($r, -0.84$; $\beta, 0.081$) and choice of resources ($r, -0.80$; $\beta, 0.075$) to the use of instructional techniques ($r, -0.93$; $\beta, 0.080$). This pattern of negative association is also visible in extended speaking and listening practices. Only moderate positive relationship is found out for short dialogue practices ($r, 0.64$; $\beta, 0.057$; $r, 68$; $\beta, 0.060$; $r, 58$; $\beta, 0.06$).

These results largely suggest that contents that dominantly appear in the examination received considerable attention of teachers at the expense of those which do not have space in the exam. The results further suggest that the focus of instruction was mainly on form-based over meaning-based instruction. Much of the time was spent on dealing with discrete-point sentence exercises. Teachers were devoted to maximise grammar and vocabulary knowledge of the students. Other categories such as discourse level speaking and writing practices, listening and pronunciation were not given due attention even though these areas of the language help learners to promote real life and purposeful communicative competence

Table 2: Students' Involvement against the Timeframe across Syllabus Contents

| Content/ skills modality | Class1 | Class2 | Class3 | Class4 | Class5 | Mean |
|--|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Listening practice | 5.50% | 7.40% | 0% | 5% | 6.60% | 4.9% |
| Speaking practice with meaning-based and purpose communication | 8.25% | 11.55 | 9.19% | 7.45% | 7% | 8.87% |
| Reading comprehension | 75.14% | 80.50% | 85.14% | 82.29% | 86.13% | 81.75% |
| Writing practice beyond a sentence level | 7.16% | 6.29% | 7.75% | 0% | 4.22% | 5 % |
| Grammar | 89.1435 | 87.50% | 94.14% | 95.29% | 89.14% | 92.56% |
| Vocabulary | 83.75% | 90% | 85% | 82% | 81.50% | 84.45% |
| Short dialogue | 75.25% | 82.50% | 75% | 75.50% | 80.50% | 77.75% |

This table presents the rate of learners' engagement in the practice of the contents of the syllabus as per the time frame set in the syllabus. As indicated in the table, there is a significant variation in the degree of learners' engagement in the practices of the skills. While learners were engaged in grammar (92.87%), vocabulary(84.45%), reading comprehension (81.45%), and short dialogue (77.75%) practices according to the time frame stated in the syllabus, they did not devote sufficient amount of time to other areas of language areas such as listening (6.6%), extended meaning-based speaking (8.87%) and writing (5%) practices .

These results are consistent with the data generated through the in depth interview and focus group discussion in which the students justified their actions in the learning practices and strategies. The students, among others, remarked that grammar, vocabulary and reading

comprehension are their priority areas of learning as these areas frequently appear in the national examinations.

Table 3: Parents' action in a reaction to their perception of their children's GSECEE

| Questions | | I frequently do this | | I do this sometimes | | I seldom do this | | Not sure | | I don't do this | | |
|-----------|--|----------------------|------|---------------------|------|------------------|------|----------|------|-----------------|---------|--------|
| No | Item | Freq. | Per. | Freq. | Per. | Freq. | Per. | Freq. | Per. | Freq. | Percent | Mean |
| 1 | Showing concern to discuss EGSEC English examination with children | 18 | 64.2 | 6 | 21 | 1 | 3.6 | 1 | 3.6 | 1 | 3.5 | 4.46** |
| 3 | Talking to children in English or finding someone who can speak with the child in English | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3.5 | 5 | 19.7 | 3 | 10.5 | 20 | 71% | 1.35* |
| 4 | Talking to the child about the materials /books s/he has read for the exam | 8 | 28 | 2 | 7 | 2 | 7 | 4 | 14 | 9 | 32.2 | 2.4 |
| 5 | Encouraging the child to read more English books | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 14 | 1 | 3.6 | 23 | 82.5 | 2.82 |
| 6 | taking the initiative to watch some English TV programs/movies with my child | 1 | 3.5 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 7 | 3 | 21.3 | 20 | 71 | 1.51* |
| 7 | Buying extra English books or magazines for the child in addition to those required by the school | 2 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3.6 | 25 | 89.3 | 1.25* |
| 8 | Buying books that particularly help the child prepare for the examination | 22 | 78.6 | 2 | 7 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 3.6 | 3 | 9.5 | 3.92** |
| 9 | Because of the EGSEC English examination, sending the child to cram schools mainly for the sake of the EGSEE | 21 | 76.7 | 6 | 21.4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4.85** |
| N=28 | | | | | | | | | | | | |

This table presents the data on the actions of parents in a move to support their children in their English language learning in general and preparing them for this exam in particular. The results show that parents made different types of support for their children. Yet, the degree and nature of support varies, suggesting that the parents are influenced by the stake of their children's national examination.

As indicated in this table, most parents (78.6%) invested in resources which they believe will directly enable their children pass their exam. Similarly, most parents (76.7%) sent their children to high-paying cram schools mainly for the purpose of helping learners pass their national exams.

In contrast, most parents did not tend to provide support which they do not believe to have a direct contribution to their national examination. For example, most (71%) did not make support that enhance productive skills in the long term. Also, they (89%) did not tend to provide reading or listening resources that would provide learners richer exposure to the target language in use.

Taken over all, the actions of parents are significantly influenced by the immediate stake carried by the national examination. These quantitative figures are also consistent with the reflections of parents on this subject in the in-depth interview and focus group discussions.

5. Discussion of Results

It has been reiterated in the earlier sections of this study and elsewhere in the professional literature that high-stake tests, as one of the major components of an educational process, have a decisive role in driving the actions of actors in the educational system. This role of tests mainly emanates from the very fact that they carry strong human stake.

The Ethiopian General Secondary Education English Examination (EGSEE), one of such tests in the Ethiopian educational system, has been found to have a profound impact on the actions of three segments of players in the educational system of the country. This impact is outlined in the quantitative data presentation. Yet, this presentation of the quantitative data tells only what can be quantified in the investigation of the issue. A much richer picture of the phenomenon is captured through the qualitative tools of data collection in the study.

This section brings into light the larger picture on the subject by interpreting the qualitative data in a way it complements the quantitative data presented earlier. As such the discussion takes in turn the data generated from teachers, students and parents in a way it shows the impact of the high-stake tests on the moves of the three actors in the educational process.

Impact on Teachers' Instructional Practice

The evidences produced in the course of the study showed that the instructional practices of teachers was negatively affected by the nature of the high-stake tests. As a clear manifestation of this effect, teachers adjusted their language teaching practice towards upcoming examination.

They budgeted much of their time and attention to contents recurrently appearing in the examination at the expense of other contents. Particularly, teachers gave emphasis to grammar, vocabularies and to some extent to reading comprehension exercises at the expense of speaking, writing and listening practices. Further, teachers' practices were mainly devoted to reviewing and working on commercially published materials and past exam papers instead of dealing with the prescribed textbooks which intended to teach the four language skills with a reasonable degree of emphasis and integration.

While this is the general picture of the phenomena clearly observed by the researcher in the classroom, more evidences substantiating the effect is reported by the teachers. The teachers' version of the evidences largely revealed that the high stake-tests profoundly influenced teachers' belief and decision making processes in meeting the immediate demands of stakeholders (students and parents).

To this end , most teachers interviewed in the study reported that he/she knows that learners have long term and short term learning goals. The immediate short term goal, according to the teachers is, to pass this national examination. The long term learning goal, on the other hand, is to develop the required level of language competence across the whole areas of the target language. Yet, this two learning goals require different instructional actions. While the immediate goal requires a focused instructional actions of targeting language contents recurring in the national examination, the long term goal needs practice of productive skills with an extended extra time and learner motivation for practice.

Thus, the teachers justified their actions by prioritizing these goals of learners. One of the teachers justified his actions, saying:

As you have observed , I mainly focus on grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension. I do this because these are the areas of language that have a decisive role on the fate of the learners. Not teaching these areas intensively would mean making students lose their golden opportunity to join vocational training or pre-university preparatory schooling . Of course, I know that productive skills of speaking and writing are important in students' future life . Yet, mastery of productive skills does not help them to secure this golden chance. Therefore, I give priority to the former set of skills.

Another teacher made a reference to the motivation and rights of students as a ground for her instructional action. She notes:

I emphasize the teaching of grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension because these are the skills learners are hungry for. They are obsessed with these set of skills as a means to achieve their immediate goal (passing the national exam).On the contrary, they do not have any motivation to use their time for the practice of speaking and writing. In doing so, the students are prioritizing their goals and I believe that it is their right to make these decisions. Where the students are clearly showing their immediate stake and where they show you how to use their time, how can you move against it ? I should respect their rights.

Looking into the remarks of the two teachers, one could see that the strong stake carried by the examinations deeply influenced their belief which in turn dictates their instructional actions . This evidence is consistent with the postulations of Alderson and Wall (1993:120-12). According to these authorities, while tests influence what the teachers teach and how they teach, the most profound influence manifests in the form of belief which dictates the whole of their moves in their instructional practice. This belief of the teachers suggest that the teachers will not in the future engage their learners in the practice of productive skills unless these skills are sufficiently covered in the national examination. This is because they strongly believe that language areas should receive due attention based on their instrumental role to attain decisive immediate stakes of learners (passing the exam) rather remote goals of developing spoken and written communicative competence in the future.

Impact on Learners' Learning practice and strategies

Looking into the impact of the test on the professional practice and belief of teachers, one would reasonably expect a mirror image of this impact on students. In fact, the national examination seriously influenced the students' language learning practices and study strategies. Among others, the exam requirements exerted considerable influence on students' choice of language areas for practice. Students invested much of their time in practising grammar, vocabulary

and reading comprehension exercises. As a result, students' practices were targeted to memorize grammatical rules and decontextualized vocabulary items which, according to them, are key to pass the examination.

While this is clear in the quantitative data produced through the classroom observation, a consistent evidence was reported by the learners themselves. One student, for example, remarked:

Grammar and vocabulary are my priority areas of study. Thus, I want to invest my time and attention to these areas in order to pass the exam and join preparatory class. I don't waste my time and energy to study listening, speaking and writing skills because these skills do not appear in the examination, but for my general knowledge, I know these skills are important and I will study them after the exam.

Further, the students geared their effort exclusively towards examination requirements and maximizing their endeavours to practice different test-taking strategies that help them answer only the multiple-choice items in the examination. This move of the learners manifest in two ways. First, they practice test-taking strategies by themselves and insist on their teachers teaching them these strategies and the probable contents of the upcoming examination. Secondly, they tend to use commercially published material which characteristically contains multiple-choice questions of past national examinations.

To examine these moves of learners, a group of students were made to reflect on their use of resource for their learning purposes. In doing so, the focus groups were asked to determine whether the teaching materials developed by national ministry of education were appropriate to prepare them to be effective in the exam, or if not, whether they used or adapted commercially published materials to meet their own objectives.

Responding to the questions, almost all of the students reported that they exhaustively used commercially published materials. Yet, concerning the prescribed textbook, they used this book only whenever they were supposed to do class work and assignment activities. Students further claimed that they commonly used books which resemble the format of the national examination. For instance, 'Practical English Grammar,' 'Mega Book of Modern English Grammar', 'Advanced English Grammar' are some of the commercially published books which were frequently used by the students. These books do not treat every language element and skill in an integrated manner so

as to promote students' communicative competence because basically they are intended to develop rule-based discrete grammar knowledge of students.

Students justified that these materials are important and timely to prepare them well for the examination because these materials contain brief notes and many past examinations exercises with their answer keys. Besides, the students claimed that these materials are written with simple language and manageable to comprehend compared to the prescribed textbooks. Regarding their textbook, students argued that the book is very voluminous, bulky, and cumbersome and the tasks are demanding and repetitive. Again, students said their textbooks do not clearly present grammar activities which prepare them for the national examination.

For example one student claims:

I do not use materials prepared by MOE while studying English, especially for the national examination because these materials do not cover most of the content of the language areas appeared in the examination. Hence, I use some other materials other than recommended textbooks which I think could help me to be successful in the examination.

As can be inferred from the students' remarks, commercially published materials highly attracted students' interests even though these materials are produced by people having no expertise on material design and preparations. In this regard, Shohamy et al. (1996) claimed that commercial publishers are test 'architect'. They are wise enough to shape materials clones to the past exam papers to influence examinees' attitude in order to expect that their materials are the best sources for examinees to get prepared for the exam.

In sum, two points are clear with regard to the students. First, because of the strong stake attached to it, students have high ambition to succeed in this examination. Secondly, this ambition in turn drives their actions in learning practices, study strategies and selection of materials. These moves in effect manifested as moves of channelling the whole of their energy to practicing linguistic items appearing in the examination with no due consideration for productive skills which would potentially contribute to their long term language competence in the target language.

Impact on Parents

Parents, as one segment of actors in the education system, came under the influence of the high stake exams. The influence particularly manifested as moves of parental role driven by

the strong stake carried by the exam. Because the national exam carries strong stake, parents attached strong value to it. Further, most parents are ambitious to make their children successful in this exam and as a result join higher learning.

Driven by these forces, parents made special support for their children. They tirelessly find schools that mainly prepare student for this exam and schools with high pass rate of the national exam in previous years. Also, they invested in resources that particularly help children pass these exams. While these moves are clearly visible in the quantitative data, the quantitative data from the questionnaire and focus group discussion significantly substantiated this fact. Particularly, the qualitative data from these sources unravels parents' justifications for their moves. In one of such episodes, one parent remarked:

I made a lot of support to my child who is taking national exam (including the English language national examination) for grade ten this year . I did the same thing to my child who took this exam two years ago. Particularly, I try my best to find schools with the highest pass rate of the national exam. Once I made sure that the school has that profile, I sent my child to this school. Also, I buy books which particularly help my children to tackle the question in the national exam. Buying such books is my priority in my life. I support in their studies which I find vital to pass this exam, and I am selective in my support in terms of its contribution to the exam.

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This parent continued, justifying his actions:

I did all this because of the strong desire to make my children succeed in the national exam and later in their academic life . Passing this exam means opening the door for university learning and making their life bright. Conversely, failing this exam has a bad consequence on the life of my children . It closes a lot of opportunities in the future. So, this is the most important point to intervene in their educational life.

As we can infer from this episode, the belief and actions of the parents are profoundly influenced by the determining stake attached to this exam. While the dedication and investment made by the parent is of high importance to the growth of the children, not all of it can be useful for full potential growth of the learner. This is mainly because the parent are making this much effort without a clear awareness of the content of the exam and its potential contribution to the long term growth of their children.

This lack of knowledge is implicitly evident in their responses to interview questions over the issue of skills and knowledge their children need in their future lives. In reflecting on this issue, most parents noted that the most important knowledge and skills in learners' life is one that enables learners pass their exam, specially national exams. For exam, one parent remarked:

What knowledge can be valued more than that enables my child to pass this 'difficult' exam!?!?Also, a student can have that level of knowledge when he masters everything in the subject[English].

In the remarks of this parent and others, one can see a strong belief of the parents that their children would pass this exam because they successfully passed through the practices of the activities given in the national syllabus. Thus, the parents do not know the discrepancy between what is suggested in the curriculum (textbook) and the content of the national exam. They simply take it for granted that passing the exam is a strong evidence of all rounded competence in the target language. This, in turn, suggests that there is no chance of hearing voices of critique from the community of parents over the short comings of these exams.

Finally, it is important to note that the influence of the high stake exam on the parents extends to other manifestations of effects. Because most parents are over ambitious to make their children successful in these exams, they exert pressure over their children to study and practice material exclusively relevant to the exam . This is done mostly through coercive parental authority. This, in turn, was found to be detrimental to children. Children with such parental ambitions reported serious anxiety which affected their learning and achievement negatively. Also, teachers reported excessive pressure from parents who push for teaching-to-the-test. This push of the parents along with the expectation of students impel teachers address language areas recurrently appearing in the national exam at the expense of other skills suggested in the national syllabus.

In sum , the determining stake carried by the national exam wags every move of parents. This influence is so profound that the parents believe that the exam is of the highest importance in two ways : (1) it has a decisive role in deciding the future of their children, and (2) it is the means to attain and the end to test the required competence of learners in

the target language. Because of this belief, they geared their support to enabling their children to answer those questions in the exams. Yet, their actions are not scientifically informed in terms of the consequences of exam-led moves on the future their children.

5. Conclusion and practical implications

This study reveals that the Ethiopian General Secondary English Certificate English Examination (EGSECEE), while it has an intended end to achieve, resulted in unintended outcomes. Because this exam has a decisive role in determining the future of learners, it profoundly influences the way teachers approach their teaching, the way learners practice the language and the way parents play their role in their children education. The moves of all the three players rest on passing-the-exam-first theory. Dictated by this theory of priority, teachers taught only those language areas which dominantly appear in the national examination. This was made at the expense of other language areas such as speaking and writing practices. As a mirror image of this move of teachers, learners exclusively practice those language areas recurring in the national examination. This is done to the exclusion of the productive skills. Parents also moved to enable their children pass this exam. Their actions were characteristically aggressive moves to make their children succeed in this exam. Yet, they were not critical over the role of their support in terms of its long term impact on the competence of their children.

These evidences have strong educational implications at policy level. It is clear from the results that when national exams carry strong stake, major actors in educational process channel their energy to actions that enable them succeed in passing that examination. They make a tremendous investment in terms of time, money, and strategy. Yet, much of this investment is a national waste where the tests are weak in content validity (where there is a mismatch between the content of the exam and the content of the syllabus reflecting the language skills required by the future life of students). Thus, content validity of high stake exams like this is a critical issue. It is imperative for policy makers in language education to take actions to the effect of improving the content validity of these exam in a way it tests language skills

indispensably important in the future lives of students. This, in turn, would make parents, learners and parent invest their time and money profitably.

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