

The Impact of High-Stakes Ministerial Examinations on the Pedagogical Practices of English Teachers in Sixth-Grade Preparatory Schools in Iraq

Abdul Sattar Ibrahim Shabeeb

General Directorate of Education in Anbar, Ministry of Education, Anbar, Iraq

sattar.shabeeb@gmail.com**KEYWORDS:** Ministerial Exam, High-Stake Tests, Pedagogical Practices, Students' Performance.<https://doi.org/10.51345/v36i3.1155.g582>

ABSTRACT:

This study is a quantitative, descriptive-correlational investigation that aims at exploring the impact of ministerial exams on teachers' pedagogical practices in sixth-grade preparatory schools in Iraq, students' ability to engage in critical thinking and develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter. It seeks to argue for or against the effectiveness of those practices on the English language education system. A structured questionnaire consisting of 30 items was administered to a random sample of 73 English teachers working in preparatory schools within Ramadi city in Anbar Governorate. The reliability and validity of the instrument were confirmed using Spearman correlation, Cronbach's Alpha, and split-half reliability methods. The analysis of the research results was guided by the theoretical framework of washback, which examines the influence of testing on teaching and learning practices. Findings indicate that the predictable nature of ministerial tests significantly shapes both instructional content and teaching methods. However, an overemphasis on test preparation leads to superficial learning outcomes, diminishes student motivation, and overlooks learners' developmental potential. Furthermore, it restricts teacher autonomy and stifles classroom creativity.

REFERENCES:

- Chapelle, C., & Douglas, D. (1993). Foundations and directions for a new decade of language testing. In D. Douglas & C. Chapelle (Eds.), *A new decade of language testing research* (pp. 1–22). TESOL Publications.
- Cheng, L. (1997). How does washback influence teaching? Implications for Hong Kong. *Language and Education*, 11(1), 38–54.
- Cheng, L. (2005). *Changing language teaching through language testing: A washback study*. Cambridge University Press.
- Goodwin, A. L., et al. (2007). The No Child Left Behind Act and English Language Learners: A Review of the Literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(2), 150–175.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (1997). Washback, impact and validity: Ethical concerns. *Language Testing*, 14(3), 295–303. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026553229701400306>
- Hattie, J. (2009). *Visible Learning: A Synthesis of Over 800 Meta-Analyses Relating to Achievement*. Routledge.
- Hughes, A. (1993). *Testing for language teachers* (2nd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- Kellaghan, Thomas, George F. Madaus and Peter W. Airasian (1982) *The Effect of Standardized Testing*. Kluwer. Nijhoff
- Koretz, Daniel. (2017) *The Testing Charade Pretending to Make School Better*. printed in the United States of America
- Messick, S. (1996). Validity and washback in language testing. *Language Testing*, 13(3), 241–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026553229601300302>
- Messieres, C., Blacknell, N. & Edward, L. (2013) *Teacher's Guide Book* first edition. Garnet Publishing Ltd.
- Moremi, M., Mafuraga, M. and Mogotsi, B. (2018). "Implications of non-assessment of the speaking and listening skills in the Botswana general certificate of secondary education (BGCSE) English language examinations", *International Journal of Development and Sustainability*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 107–119.
- Pearson, I. (1988). Tests as levers of change (or "putting first things first"). In D. Chamberlain & R. Baumgartner (Eds.), *ESP in the classroom: Practice and evaluation* (pp. 98–107). Modern English Publications in association with the British Council.
- Pintrich, P. R. (2004). *Motivation in Education: Theory, Research, and Applications*. Pearson.

- Popham, W. J. (2001). The truth about testing: An educator's call to action. Alexandria, Virginia USA Web site: <http://www.ascd.org>.
- Shohamy, E. (1992). Beyond proficiency testing: A diagnostic feedback testing model for assessing foreign language learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, 76(4), 513–521. <https://doi.org/10.2307/329885>
- Styron, R. A., & Styron, J. L. (2012). Teaching to the test: A controversial issue in quantitative measurement. *Wages*, M. (2017). "No One Left Standing Will the Rewrite of NCLB Be enough?" Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wall, D., & Alderson, J. C. (1993). Examining washback: The Sri Lankan impact study. *Language Testing*, 10(1), 41–69. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026553229301000103>
- Zakharov, A., & Carnoy, M. (2021). Does teaching to the test improve student learning?.

1. Introduction

The pedagogical practices stated in the title of this research are meant to be those methods adopted by teachers to teach English to 6th grade preparatory schools students where the focus is solely on preparing students to take the high-stake tests, that is, the standardized final exam administered by the ministry of education. Although, these methods have proven to be effective in ensuring excellent results on the part of the students, they create an environment where students do a passive role of rote memorization of ready-made material that prepare them to the final exam. Teachers should not solely focus on teaching students how to provide answers and achieve high grades. It is essential to encourage students to ask questions, think critically, and engage in meaningful dialogue. By shifting the focus from providing answers to fostering a culture of inquiry, teachers can empower students to explore, question, and develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter. Encouraging students to ask questions helps them develop critical thinking skills, generate hypotheses, make inferences, and engage actively in the learning process.

A close diagnosis of the problem reveals that three parties are actively involved in deepening and perpetuating this issue. These are the students and their parents; the teachers; and the administration. The focus, especially in recent years, on gaining high grades to ensure admission to prestigious colleges, like that of medicine, has led the first party, which is the students and their parents to exercise high pressure on the educational process, especially the teacher, in their focus on the final results rather the means by which these results have been achieved. The teacher on the other hand feels compelled to succumb to the demands of the first party. The third party plays a significant role, although not directly, in enhancing this issue by its reward-punishment system. The administration rewards those teachers whose students excel in their achievements in those high-stakes exams.

2. Research Objectives

The objectives of the present research can be seen in the following:

1. To investigate the English teaching practices in the sixth preparatory grade, which solely emphasizes answers to questions and prioritizes rote memorization for achieving good grades
2. To check whether this focus on teaching answers impacts students' ability to engage in critical thinking and develop a deeper understanding of the subject matter.
3. To probe into the relationship between the teachers' focus on teaching responses to exams and the overall effectiveness of the English language education system.
4. To find out whether or not the merits of this method overweight the demerits, in other words, to advice for or against adopting the method

3. Research Questions

The present research seeks to provide answer for the following questions:

1. How does awareness of the ministerial test influence English teachers' selection of language skills and content in sixth-grade preparatory classrooms in Iraq?
2. In what way does the format and structure of the ministerial test affect the teaching methods and instructional strategies adopted by English teachers?
3. What are the emotional and motivational effects of high-stakes ministerial testing on both English teachers and their students?
4. To what extent do teachers use students' performance on the ministerial test to inform their assessment practices and instructional decisions throughout the academic year?
5. How do standardized ministerial tests influence broader educational practices, such as curriculum planning, school accountability, and teacher autonomy in Iraqi preparatory schools?

5. Limitations of the research

The research is limited to sixth-grade preparatory English teachers in Ramadi City with at least five years of experience, during the academic year 2022–2023.

6. Literature Review

Although this topic has received ample attention by several researchers around the world, and especially in the USA, the researcher could not locate any study conducted inside Iraq to examine this crucial issue. Styron and Styron (2012) in their study entitled "Teaching to the Test: A Controversial Issue in Quantitative Measurement" focus on the "pros and cons of focusing curricular and pedagogical decisions primarily on mastery of those skills and concepts measured by standardized tests. The research concludes that most disturbing though is the use of unethical practices aimed at improving student standardized test scores. These practices have been fostered through undue pressure, primarily internal pressure created by teachers and administrators themselves, to provide students with answers to test items without developing problem-solving and higher order thinking skills and, most importantly, knowledge transfer. Popham (2001:16) argues that our teachers today are increasingly caught up in a "measurement-induced maelstrom" focused on raising students' scores on high-stakes tests.

In another study by Zakharov and Carnoy (2021) entitled "Does teaching to the test improve student learning?" the authors focus on the impact of these kinds of narrow teaching practices on student performance on a specific test as well as a general knowledge test. They come to the conclusion that "test-specific classwork and practice tests with specific test items tend to have little or negative impacts on curriculum specific or general knowledge test performance." In another study by Goodwin et al. (2007) entitled "Teaching to the Test: How No Child Left Behind Impacts Language Policy" sheds light on an important issue in the USA related to the educational Act of fostering learning opportunities to all children, specially non-native English learners has led to creating curriculum and instruction that "focuses on test content and strategies, and English as a second language classes have become more like English language arts classes for native English speakers." The study reaches a conclusion that "standardized tests become de facto language policy when attached to high-stakes consequences, shaping what content schools teach, how it is taught, by whom it is taught, and in what language(s) it is taught."

7. The concept of Washback

Washback, or backwash, refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning. Hughes (1993) defines it as "the effect of testing on teaching and learning." Alderson and Wall (1993) suggest that tests shape what and how teachers teach, as well as how students learn. As

they note, “It is common to claim the existence of washback... and to declare that tests can be powerful determiners, both positively and negatively, of what happens in classrooms” (Wall & Alderson, 1993, p. 41).

Shohamy (1992) describes washback as “the utilization of external language tests to affect and drive foreign language learning in the school context” (p. 513). Cheng (2005) also observes that “changes were observed only in the way teachers organized classroom activities... [but] it is difficult to judge whether the washback effect... is simply as a result of cramming for the examination, or a genuine difference in the way skills were being taught” (p. 128). To sum up, tests do more than measure learning—they shape what and how teaching happens. Yet, one must ask whether these changes truly deepen understanding or simply push for exam success.

7.1 Rationale for the Five-Dimensional Washback Model

This research adopts a five-part washback model—Content, Methodological, Affective, Assessment-Related, and Systemic (Accountability)—to look at how high-stakes exams affect teaching English in Iraqi sixth-grade schools. It builds on Shohamy’s framework, which highlights important ideas like Curriculum Alignment and Measurement-Driven Instruction [1, p. 185], but adds teachers’ and students’ feelings and the role of ongoing assessments, which are very important in Iraqi exam-focused system [1, p. 186]. This model helps understand how exams influence what is taught, how it is taught, how teachers and students feel, how tests are given, and the pressure schools face. See table1.

Table (1) The Five-Dimensional Washback Model

No	Items		
	Research Dimension	Shohamy’s Construct	Correspondence
1	Content Washback	Curriculum Alignment	Direct: Focus on what is taught
2	Methodological Washback	Washback Effect	Direct: How teaching methods adapt
3	Affective Washback	Washback Effect (implicit)	Conceptual: Emotional and motivational impacts
4	Assessment-Related Washback	Measurement-Driven Instruction	Direct: Influence on classroom assessment practices
5	Systemic (Accountability) Washback	Systemic Validity	Direct: Institutional and policy-level consequences

The above Five-Dimensional Washback Model consists of five parts. It shows how exams narrow the curriculum, limit teaching methods, affect emotions, shape assessments, and create pressure focused on test results. This model is carefully designed based on theory and fits the reality of Iraqi education. It answers calls from researchers for a detailed way to study how exams affect teaching, learning, feelings, testing, and school systems.

8. Washback in High-Stakes Testing

High-stakes testing has a significant impact on teaching practices, a phenomenon widely discussed in washback literature. Wall and Alderson (1993) note that “tests can be powerful determiners, both positively and negatively, of what happens in classrooms.” This influence often manifests in how teachers organize their instruction, focusing more on test-related content rather than holistic skill development. Cheng (2005: 128) observed that “changes were observed only in the way teachers organized classroom activities,” raising concerns about whether such changes are genuine pedagogical improvements or merely strategies for exam

preparation. Shohamy (1992: 513) highlights the role of external exams in directing classroom learning, referring to “the utilization of external language tests to affect and drive foreign language learning in the school context.” Similarly, Pearson (1988) emphasizes the deliberate use of exams as reform tools, stating that public examinations are intended “to persuade teachers and learners to pay serious attention to communicative skills” (p. 106), while acknowledging that they influence “the attitudes, behavior, and motivation of teachers, learners and parents” (p. 98).

Messick (1996) clarifies that washback is not just any instructional change, but one “essentially linked to the introduction and use of the test.” Chapelle and Douglas (1993) reinforce this view, noting that tests often define “what students must learn and therefore what must be taught.” As Hamp-Lyons (1997) concludes, washback embodies the belief that assessment directly shapes both teaching and learning. In this context, Cheng (1997) identifies public examinations as deliberate tools to “drive and direct intended changes in the school curriculum.” Collectively, these insights underline how high-stakes exams reshape teaching practices, often narrowing the curriculum and shifting pedagogical focus toward test performance rather than comprehensive language acquisition.

9. Methodological Washback: Changes in Teaching Strategies

Methodological washback occurs when high-stakes tests push teachers to adopt exam-focused, teacher-centered strategies, limiting meaningful learning. This shift can lead to unethical practices and hinder the development of critical thinking and knowledge transfer. Similarly, Popham (2001) highlights that teachers are increasingly trapped in a “measurement-induced maelstrom” that compels them to teach narrowly to raise student scores on high-stakes tests (p. 16). Such pressure fosters teaching methods that emphasize test performance over educational depth.

Zakharov and Carnoy (2021) also examine the effects of teaching to the test in their study “Does Teaching to the Test Improve Student Learning?” They conclude that “test-specific classwork and practice tests with specific test items tend to have little or negative impacts on curriculum-specific or general knowledge test performance,” demonstrating that focusing solely on exam drills may hinder actual learning gains.

The consequences of methodological washback are visible in the Iraqi EFL context. The 6th preparatory English textbook, developed by Garnet Education, includes three components: Student's Book, Activity Book, and Teacher's Guide. While the Teacher's Guide claims to support instruction in all four language skills—reading, writing, speaking, and listening. It also states that listening is not included in the exam (Messieres et al., 2013:7-8). As a result, teachers give lesser attention to listening and speaking, two core communicative skills that are crucial for language proficiency but are excluded from the final ministerial exam.

This exclusion affects classroom methods, pushing teachers to focus on reading, grammar, and writing model answers, while neglecting speaking and listening activities. As a result, textbook goals are overlooked in favor of exam content, raising a key concern: Are students learning English as a language or just to pass a test?

10. Issues with the Current Ministerial Examination System

In the context of education, teaching any language should extend beyond merely preparing students for standardized tests, which often emphasize teaching some language skills over others. Moremi and Mogotsi (2018:108) explain that “The study of any language, which involves both its teaching and assessment, centers on the four language skills. These are the skills of reading, speaking, listening and writing. Full competence in a language therefore means mastery of these skills in that particular language learnt”. They further suggest that the

purpose of assessment is to provide information on whether teaching and learning has successfully taken place. Therefore, teachers need regular information on the development process of pupils' knowledge, skills and understanding".

The current testing system faces several challenges that impact its effectiveness and reliability. Excluding listening and speaking skills from the standardized test, there are problems related to the nature of the questions which lead to a high level of predictability. Questions in these standardized tests become repetitive but differ solely in their wordings. Examining samples of these standardized question sheets for the last five years reveals the repetition of several of these questions either verbatim or with very slight change in vocabulary or word order. This fact encourages teachers mainly to focus their attention on specific topics in the textbook, leading to the issue of teaching to prepare students for the test rather than to equip them with the necessary educational skills.

Although the textbook presupposes that the Iraqi state examination system requires students to "demonstrate both knowledge of language and an ability to use the language. Fortunately, these two aspects go hand in hand, to some extent, for students of this age group" (Messieres et al., 2013:3). The reality of this testing system shows that the only knowledge required to pass these tests is rote memorization. Hattie's comprehensive analysis of educational interventions indicates that standardized tests may not effectively measure the breadth of student abilities (Hattie, 2009).

10.1 Text-book Learning Outcomes

The English text book designed by Garnet Education for the 6th preparatory grades falls into three books: Student's Book, Activity Book, and Teacher's Guide Book. The Teacher's Guide provides a detailed instruction on how to use the Student's and Activity books effectively to ensure that the four main skills in addition to grammar and vocabulary are being covered in classroom. On page 8 the book explains various activities that can be used in class targeting various skills. The book pays equal attention to all four skills despite the fact that on page 7 the book clearly indicates that the listening skill is not included in the test, thus, supposing lesser attention to be given to this no less important skill (Messieres et al, 2013). However, in reality both listening and speaking are excluded from the standardized final exam, leading to the issue that this research is concerned with which is teaching students only responses to exams in the English classrooms. In this way, the learning outcomes that are supposed to be achieved are being ignored for the purpose of ensuring high grades on the part of the students.

11. High-Stakes Tests (Ministerial Examination)

In Iraq, high-stakes testing is utilized to evaluate student and school performance in various subjects of the sixth preparatory grades. These tests carry significant consequences for test takers, as passing them can lead to benefits such as admission to prestigious colleges, while failing can result in disadvantages like being required to take remedial classes or attend a college outside the test taker's preferences. The repercussions of failing high-stakes tests are substantial, impacting various aspects of a student's academic and professional life, thereby emphasizing the importance of performing well on these assessments to avoid negative outcomes. These assessments are directly linked to incentives for participants to perform well and serve as accountability measures for schools and teachers, with results used as the basis for rewards and punishments.

Popham (2001:16) highlights the detrimental impact of the current emphasis on high-stakes testing in education. He describes this focus as a "measurement-induced maelstrom," a hazardous whirlpool that can drag educators down even when approached cautiously. Popham argues that the widespread belief in U.S. society that good test scores equate to good education has led to an obsession with high-stakes tests. This obsession diverts educators' attention from making genuinely important educational decisions. Consequently, the primary negative effect of high-stakes testing programs is that they shift the focus away from meaningful educational practices and towards test performance. Teaching is more than just assembling a series of best practices that are expected to lead students to perfect standardized test scores. Standardized tests may not accurately measure a student's true abilities, as they often focus on rote memorization rather than critical thinking skills (Pintrich, 2004: 85-95).

A central concern surrounding test-based accountability is that teachers may narrow teaching practices to improve test performance on a curriculum-based specific knowledge test rather than student learning. More broadly Teachers may feel pressured to "teach to the test," focusing on test-specific content rather than fostering a deeper understanding of the subject matter.

12. Negative Pedagogical Consequences of Teaching to the Test

Michele Wages (2017) raises some critical points about the limitations and potential negative impacts of standardized tests. Here are some key takeaways (p.23):

1. **False Sense of Security:** Standardized tests can give a misleading impression of a student's true abilities. High scores might not reflect a deep understanding or the ability to apply knowledge in real-life situations.
2. **Memorization vs. Application:** Students might memorize information for the test but lack the skills to use that knowledge practically. This gap can be problematic in real-world scenarios where application is key.
3. **Impact on Self-Esteem:** Labeling students as "winners" or "losers" based on test scores can harm their self-esteem and lead to low expectations for themselves. This can have long-term effects on their motivation and confidence.
4. **Unmeasured Skills:** Standardized tests often fail to assess important skills such as creativity, critical thinking, resilience, motivation, and persistence. These skills are crucial for success in many areas of life but are not captured by traditional testing methods.

13. Positive Effects of Teaching to test

When students learn only to pass a test, they often struggle to apply the memorized information in real-world situations. This can be especially problematic after entering the workforce, where they may need to relearn material on the job. Such gaps can create a poor impression with employers and, in fields like healthcare, may even have serious consequences. This is a key reason why many responsible teachers avoid teaching to the test. Kellaghan et al. (1982) noted that "in some cases the decision based on test performance may have seemed very important to people: whether or not they would go to a certain college, whether or not they would be hired for a job, whether or not they would be promoted at work" (p. 2). When students focus solely on test plans or practice exams, they often overlook essential content that forms the foundation for future learning. Teaching to the test can unintentionally hinder students' long-term career development, as employers tend to favor well-rounded candidates over those trained only to meet exam requirements. This issue affects all career paths. The real

challenge is finding the right balance—teachers must prepare students for exams while also equipping them with broader skills. Some rely on test prep tools, while others use a rich curriculum and treat test prep as a supplement.

14. Research Design and Methodology

The researcher has used a quantitative descriptive design with a cross-sectional approach to explore the practices of sixth-grade English teachers in Ramadi city regarding ministerial tests. The research covered all eleven preparatory schools in Ramadi after approval from relevant authorities. Questionnaire was distributed to each English teacher responses, were compiled for analysis. The questionnaire was chosen for its efficiency in reaching many participants, ensuring standardized responses, and facilitating quick data analysis. The variety of responses from Ramadi may reflect broader trends across the country.

14.1 Sample of the Research

This research uses stratified random sampling to select 73 English teachers (male and female) who teach sixth-grade preparatory classes in Ramadi city. All eleven preparatory schools in the city were included to ensure broad coverage. Teachers had at least five years of experience and came from varied teaching backgrounds.

14.2 Collecting Data

Data was collected through a questionnaire designed according to Washback Theory. It focused on teachers' exam preparation methods, teaching priorities, and challenges. The questionnaire was informed by past studies, expert input, and the researcher's teaching experience in Iraq. This method helps explore how teachers prepare students for exams and reflect broader trends in exam-driven instruction.

14.2 The Questionnaire

The main tool used for data collection in this research was a structured questionnaire composed of 30 items, all of which were precisely designed within the conceptual framework of Washback Theory. The questionnaire was specifically developed to explore how the requirements of ministerial English examinations affect the pedagogical choices, emotional responses, and systemic practices of sixth-grade English teachers in Iraqi preparatory schools. Each item was deliberately crafted to correspond to a specific dimension of washback—namely, content, methodological, affective, systemic (accountability), or curricular—thus ensuring both construct validity and theoretical coherence. A five-point Likert scale was employed for all items to quantify participant responses and facilitate rigorous statistical analysis.

To make sure the questionnaire was clear, reliable, and based on the five-dimensional washback model, the researcher followed a step-by-step process to develop and check the questionnaire, as explained below.

Step 1: Validity of the questionnaire:

To examine the questionnaire validity, the researcher used these ways:

- **Face validity:** To examine the questionnaire validity, the researcher introduced it to a group of specialists, including professors and highly qualified long experienced teachers of methodology, from different universities. Juries modified this questionnaire adding, deleting or correcting some items. All juries approved the questionnaire, which the researcher applied in his research.
- **The internal consistency validity:** This type of validity indicates the correlation of each item degree with the 30 total average of the questionnaire. The researcher

used this method to calculate the correlation of the questionnaire. Pearson correlation formula was used to calculate the correlation between the score on each item of the questionnaire with total score of the questionnaire.

Step 2: Pilot study

The refined questionnaire was given to 10 teachers from preparatory schools in Ramadi. Quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS, with a particular focus on item-total correlation and internal consistency (Cronbach's Alpha). The overall reliability of the instrument was strong ($\alpha = 0.85$), with subscales ranging from 0.76 to 0.81. These results empirically confirmed the internal consistency of the items within each washback dimension.

Step 3: Final Categorization

Based on the theoretical framework, expert input, and empirical data, the 30 items were finalized and categorized as follows:

- **Content Washback** (6 items)
- **Methodological Washback** (5 items)
- **Affective Washback** (10 items)
- **Assessment-Related Washback** (5 items)
- **Systemic (Accountability) Washback** (4 items)

This categorization not only ensures theoretical and methodological clarity but also enables a multi-layered analysis of how standardized ministerial exams affect teaching practices in Iraq. It offers insight into the pedagogical, emotional, assessment-based, and institutional consequences of high-stakes testing in sixth-grade English classrooms.

14.3 Final Form of the Questionnaire

In order to analyze the way teachers responded to the items of the questionnaire, a number of tables is provided. It contains the survey of the 30 questionnaire items which illustrate the categorization of these questionnaire and the distribution of **Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree** and **Strongly Disagree** responses.

14.4 Data Analysis

Analysis of the collected data was performed using SPSS application. For a comprehensive overview of the teachers' responses, descriptive statistics such as means, standard deviations, and frequencies were computed. To delve deeper into the dataset, inferential statistical tests, notably T-tests, were utilized to identify significant differences and relationships. This strategic application of diverse statistical techniques allowed the researcher to effectively discern patterns, accurately assess the degree of washback effects, and formulate evidence-based conclusions pertinent to the research objectives.

14.4.1 Data Analysis and Results Discussion

The results show that the mean of all sample responses was on an upward trend. This is clear by comparing the arithmetic mean values with the hypothetical mean of (3), which clearly shows that there is a significant impact of centralized tests on the method of teaching English. Furthermore, the calculated t-statistic for all items exceeded the tabular t-value at the 5% level of significance, which shows that the results of the statistical analysis can be relied upon to estimate the relationship between ministerial tests and teaching practices. The overall mean for all questionnaire items was 3.8941, notably exceeding the hypothetical average, see table 2.

Table (2) One-Sample Statistics

	Items	No.	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	Awareness of MT motivates me to teach the various language skills better.	73	4.23	1.087	9.692	.000
2	Awareness of MT motivates me to teach the various language elements better.	73	4.42	1.066	11.417	.000
3	Awareness of MT can help me predict some of the questions that can be repeated from the previous years.	73	3.86	.822	8.972	.000
4	Awareness of MT can help me focus on language materials which are included on standardized tests before.	73	3.73	.886	7.001	.000
5	Components of the standardized test push teachers to eliminate the scope of the curriculum and restrict teaching accordingly	73	3.97	1.027	8.091	.000
6	standardized tests diminish teachers' autonomy and passion for learning.	73	3.93	1.005	7.923	.000
7	Awareness of MT influences the teacher's selection of the methods of teaching.	73	3.77	.950	6.896	.000
8	The teachers' lesson plans are designed based on the content of the standardized test.	73	3.68	.984	5.946	.000
9	Standardized tests dictate the teaching style and restrict the teaching experience.	73	4.29	1.112	9.898	.000
10	Teachers may feel compelled to teach language elements based on the MT rather than explore broader educational topics or approaches that could enrich students' learning experiences.	73	3.97	.726	11.447	.000
11	The teachers' teaching style is affected by the content of the standardized test.	73	3.88	.816	9.185	.000
12	Overemphasis on students' scores in the standardized test has made many teachers to feel disillusioned.	73	3.90	1.082	7.138	.000
13	.Awareness of MT can develop my students' creativity in learning the English language.	73	3.99	1.112	7.580	.000
14	Awareness of MT can develop my students' critical thinking in learning the English language.	73	4.03	1.080	8.130	.000
15	Awareness of the MT limits teachers' ability to master the materials.	73	4.01	1.328	6.522	.000
16	Standardized test may limit teachers' creativity.	73	4.07	.977	9.349	.000
17	Awareness of MT can develop my creativity in teaching the English language.	73	3.73	.886	7.001	.000
18	Students' preoccupation to gain high scores in the standardized test affect their motivation.	73	3.81	.908	7.608	.000
19	The overemphasis on standardized test have led students into blind memorization of the material rather than learning it.	73	3.95	.815	9.914	.000

20	Overemphasis on students' scores in the standardized test can have negative influence leading teachers away from their jobs.	73	4.01	1.086	7.972	.001
21	Awareness of MT can develop my critical thinking in teaching the English language.	73	3.82	.933	7.526	.000
22	Data result in standardized test may influence the teachers' way to assess students' learning progress throughout the year.	73	3.84	.882	8.093	.000
23	Gaining data concerning students' achievement on the standardized test may affect teachers' decisions concerning some students who experience special educational needs.	73	3.74	1.106	5.715	.000
24	Gaining data from standardized test about students' achievement inform teachers to develop their professional skills of teaching strategies.	73	3.47	1.107	3.596	.000
25	Students' scores in the standardized test really reflect the true abilities of the students.	73	3.73	.947	6.553	.000
26	The repetitive nature of the standardized test has resulted in an increase rate of predictability.	73	4.12	.897	10.703	.000
27	Standardized tests are important in maintaining educational standards and accountability.	73	3.58	1.235	3.980	.000
28	Accountability in education has caused school's admiration to gain goals that otherwise would not have been achieved.	73	3.74	1.028	6.149	.000
29	The existence of the standardized tests support schools' curriculum development and educational priorities.	73	3.95	.970	8.323	.000
30	Focus on standardized testing becomes one of your priorities as a teacher.	73	3.62	1.243	4.237	.000

The above data points to a generally positive and consistent perception among teachers regarding how ministerial exams influence their classroom approaches. The combined t-statistic, amounting to 36.130 with a significance level of 0.000, not only confirms the presence of this impact but also its strong statistical significance. These findings refer to a significant relationship between centralized testing and English language teaching. Figure (1) supports these results by visually illustrating the strength and consistency of the washback effect across the examined items.

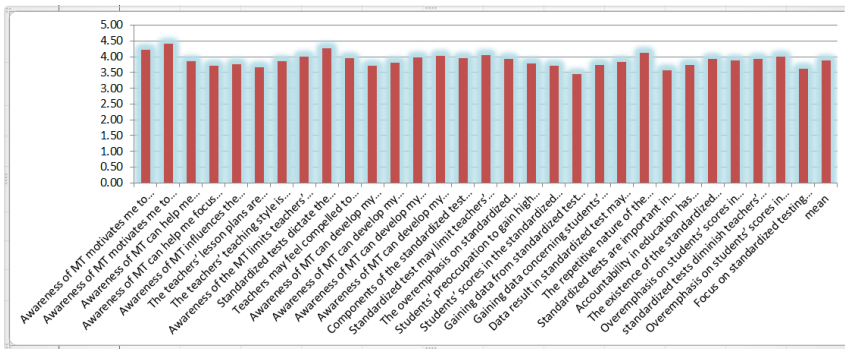


Figure (1) Strength and Consistency of the Washback Effect across the Examined Items

In the following discussion, the results of questionnaire items are analyzed in accordance with the research questions:

Research question (1) *How does awareness of the ministerial test influence English teachers' selection of language skills and content in sixth-grade preparatory classrooms in Iraq?*

Table (3) Results Analysis of Responses to Research Question (1)

No	Item	No	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
1	Awareness of MT motivates me to teach the various language skills better.	73	4.23	1.087	9.692	.000
2	Awareness of MT motivates me to teach the various language elements better.	73	4.42	1.066	11.417	.000
3	Awareness of MT can help me predict some of the questions that can be repeated from the previous years.	73	3.86	.822	8.972	.000
4	Awareness of MT can help me focus on language materials which are included on standardized tests before.	73	3.73	.886	7.001	.000
5	Components of the standardized test push teachers to eliminate the scope of the curriculum and restrict teaching accordingly	73	3.97	1.027	8.091	.000
6	standardized tests diminish teachers' autonomy and passion for learning.	73	3.93	1.005	7.923	.000
	Mean		4.02	0.982	8.849	0

Table (3) shows that the mean of the responses to research question (1) had an upward trend. This is evident by comparing the mean value of (4.02) with the hypothetical mean of (3), which indicates that there is a significant effect of the centralized tests. The calculated *t*-statistic for the responses was (8.849), which is greater than the tabular *t*-value at the 5% level of significance. This result confirms the possibility of depending on the outcomes of the statistical analysis in assessing the relationship between centralized tests and the method of teaching the English language.

Research Question (2) *In what ways does the format and structure of the ministerial test affect the teaching methods and instructional strategies adopted by English teachers?*

Table (4) Results Analysis of Responses to Research Question (2)

No	Item	No	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
7	Awareness of MT influences the teacher's selection of the methods of teaching.	73	3.77	.950	6.896	.000
8	The teachers' lesson plans are designed based on the content of the standardized test.	73	3.68	.984	5.946	.000
9	Standardized tests dictate the teaching style and restrict the teaching experience.	73	4.29	1.112	9.898	.000
10	Teachers may feel compelled to teach language elements based on the MT rather than explore broader educational topics or approaches that could enrich students' learning experiences.	73	3.97	.726	11.447	.000
11	The teachers' teaching style is affected by the content of the standardized test.	73	3.88	.816	9.185	.000
	Mean		3.918	0.918	8.674	0

Table (4) reveals that the mean of the responses to research question (2) reflects an upward trend. Comparing the overall mean value of (3.918) with the hypothetical mean of (3) indicates a statistically significant influence of centralized tests on teachers' selection of teaching methods and lesson planning. The calculated t-statistic of (8.674) exceeds the critical t-value at the 5% significance level, with a p-value of (0.000), confirming the reliability of these results. Thus, it can be concluded that ministerial tests meaningfully affect English language teachers' pedagogical practices.

Research Question (3) *What are the emotional and motivational effects of high-stakes ministerial testing on both English teachers and their students?*

Table (5) Results Analysis of Responses to Research Question (3)

No	Item	No	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
12	Overemphasis on students' scores in the standardized test has made many teachers to feel disillusioned.	73	3.90	1.082	7.138	.000
13	Awareness of MT can develop my students' creativity in learning the English language.	73	3.99	1.112	7.580	.000
14	Awareness of MT can develop my students' critical thinking in learning the English language.	73	4.03	1.080	8.130	.000
15	Awareness of the MT limits teachers' ability to master the materials.	73	4.01	1.328	6.522	.000
16	Standardized test may limit teachers' creativity.	73	4.07	.977	9.349	.000
17	Awareness of MT can develop my creativity in teaching the English language.	73	3.73	.886	7.001	.000
18	Students' preoccupation to gain high scores in the standardized test affect their motivation.	73	3.81	.908	7.608	.000

19	The overemphasis on standardized test have led students into blind memorization of the material rather than learning it.	73	3.95	.815	9.914	.000
20	Overemphasis on students' scores in the standardized test can have negative influence leading teachers away from their jobs.	73	4.01	1.086	7.972	.001
21	Awareness of MT can develop my critical thinking in teaching the English language.	73	3.82	.933	7.526	.000
	Mean		3.93	1.02	7.77	0

Table (5) shows that the mean of the responses to research question (3) exhibited an upward trend. Comparing the overall mean value of (3.93) with the hypothetical mean of (3) indicates a statistically significant effect of centralized tests on enhancing teachers' and students' creativity and critical thinking in English language teaching and learning. Moreover, the calculated *t*-statistic of (7.77) exceeds the critical *t*-value at the 5% significance level, with a significance level of (0.00), confirming the reliability of these findings. Therefore, it can be concluded that centralized tests positively influence the pedagogical practices related to creativity and critical thinking in English language education.

Research Question (4) *To what extent do teachers use students' performance on the ministerial test to inform their assessment practices and instructional decisions throughout the academic year?*

Table (6) Results Analysis of Responses to Research Question (4)

No	Item	No	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
22	Data result in standardized test may influence the teachers' way to assess students' learning progress throughout the year.	73	3.84	.882	8.093	.000
23	Gaining data concerning students' achievement on the standardized test may affect teachers' decisions concerning some students who experience special educational needs.	73	3.74	1.106	5.715	.000
24	Gaining data from standardized test about students' achievement inform teachers to develop their professional skills of teaching strategies.	73	3.47	1.107	3.596	.000
25	Students' scores in the standardized test really reflect the true abilities of the students.	73	3.73	.947	6.553	.000
26	The repetitive nature of the standardized test has resulted in an increase rate of predictability.	73	4.12	.897	10.703	.000
	Mean		3.78	0.99	6.93	0

Table (6) states that the mean of the responses to research question (4) indicates an upward trend. Comparing the mean value of (3.78) with the hypothetical mean of (3) suggests a statistically significant effect of centralized tests on teachers' use of standardized test data to assess students' progress, make decisions about students with special needs, and develop their professional teaching strategies. The calculated *t*-statistic of (6.93) exceeds the critical value

at the 5% significance level, with a significance level of (0.00), confirming the reliability of these findings. This demonstrates that the data resulting from standardized tests significantly influence teachers' pedagogical decisions and assessment methods throughout the academic year.

Research Question (5) *How do ministerial exams influence broader educational practices, such as curriculum planning, school accountability, and teacher autonomy in Iraq's preparatory schools?*

Table (7) Results Analysis of Responses to Research Question (5)

No	Item	No	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Sig. (2-tailed)
27	Standardized tests are important in maintaining educational standards and accountability.	73	3.58	1.235	3.980	.000
28	Accountability in education has caused school's admiration to gain goals that otherwise would not have been achieved.	73	3.74	1.028	6.149	.000
29	The existence of the standardized tests support schools' curriculum development and educational priorities.	73	3.95	.970	8.323	.000
30	Focus on standardized testing becomes one of your priorities as a teacher.	73	3.62	1.243	4.237	.000
	Mean		3.72	1.12	5.67	0

Table (7) shows that the mean of the responses to research question (5) demonstrated an upward trend. Comparing the overall mean value of (3.72) with the hypothetical mean of (3) indicates a significant impact of standardized tests on educational accountability, curriculum development, and teaching priorities. The calculated *t*-statistic of (5.67) exceeds the critical value at the 5% significance level, with a significance level of (0.00), confirming the statistical reliability of these findings. Thus, it can be concluded that centralized tests play a meaningful role in shaping school goals and teachers' focus on standardized testing.

15 Findings Discussion

Based on the analysis and discussion of results that addressed the research questions, there was a positive trend in how centralized ministerial exams affect English teachers' classroom practices. Teachers mentioned that knowing about the test encourages them to focus more carefully on teaching both language skills and elements. This demonstrates the content washback effect, indicating that the test plays a significant role in shaping what's taught and the instructional priorities in the classroom.

Findings strongly suggest that the structure and nature of the ministerial test profoundly influence teachers' instructional methods. Teachers, it appears, adapt their teaching styles, materials, and lesson planning to align closely with the test format. This observation resonates with the methodological washback dimension, where the demands of test preparation often dictate the mode of delivery and classroom practices, potentially sacrificing more student-centered or communicative approaches.

Participants shared how the strong focus on test performance created both positive and negative emotional ripples. Many teachers confessed to feeling disillusioned by the relentless pressure tied to standardized scores. Yet, surprisingly, some also found that the test actually fostered creativity and critical thinking, benefiting both their teaching and student learning.

This highlights the affective washback, showing just how much high-stakes exams can sway teacher morale, student motivation, and the entire emotional atmosphere of the classroom.

Data reveals that standardized test results are crucial for how teachers track students' academic progress throughout the year. Teachers also rely on these results when addressing individual learning needs and guiding their own professional development. This finding demonstrates the assessment washback dimension, underscoring how exam data informs ongoing assessment practices and instructional adjustments.

The collected responses indicate that centralized exams directly influence institutional policies and teaching priorities. Teachers perceive these tests as fundamental to maintaining educational accountability, guiding curriculum development, and setting instructional goals. These influences align with the systemic washback dimension, illustrating the broader institutional and policy-related impact of standardized testing on the education system.

16. Conclusion

The research affirms that ministerial standardized tests profoundly shape teaching practices across all washback dimensions—content, methodological, affective, assessment, and systemic—in preparatory schools. While these exams offer necessary focus and structure, they also introduce constraints that could limit creativity and holistic language development. Finding the right balance here is essential for meaningful educational reform and fostering more effective English language instruction.

Since standardized tests serve a purpose in assessing student performance, adopting a balanced approach is vital way to follow. This approach should prioritize non-cognitive skill development, integrate formative assessments, and look beyond mere test scores to truly enhance students' overall academic achievement and fulfill educational goals.

أثر الامتحانات الوزارية ذات المخاطر العالية على الممارسات التربوية لمدرسي اللغة الإنجليزية في المدارس الإعدادية للصف السادس في العراق

عبد الستار إبراهيم شبيب

المديرية العامة لتربية الأنبار، وزارة التربية، الأنبار، العراق

sattar.shabeeb@gmail.com

الكلمات المفتاحية | الامتحان الوزاري، الاختبارات ذات المخاطر العالية، الممارسات التربوية، أداء الطلبة



<https://doi.org/10.51345/v36i3.1155.g582>

المستخلص:

تعد هذه الدراسة بانها دراسة تقصي كمية، وصفية- ترابطية تحدف إلى استكشاف أثر الامتحانات الوزاري على ممارسات المدرسين التربوية في المدارس الإعدادية للصف السادس في العراق وعلى قدرة الطلاب على الانخراط في التفكير النقدي وتطوير فهم أعمق للموضوع. وهي تسعى لإظهار الحجاج التي تؤيد أو تعارض فعالية تلك الممارسات على نظام تعليم اللغة الإنكليزية. تم توزيع استبيان منظم يتكون من 30 فقرة على عينة عشوائية من 73 مدرس إنكليزي يعملون في المدارس الإعدادية داخل الرمادي في محافظة الأنبار وتم التأكيد من ثبات وصدق الأداة باستخدام طرق ارتباط سيرمان، ومعادلة ألفا كرونباخ، وطريقة التجزئة النصفية وقد حلت النتائج استناداً إلى الإطار النظري المتمثل في نتائج الاختبارات، الذي يدرس تأثير الاختبارات على ممارسات التعليم والتعلم. وقد اشارت النتائج إلى أن الطبيعة المتوقعة للاختبارات الوزارية تؤثر بشكل كبير على محتوى التعليم وطرائق التدريس. ومع ذلك، يؤثر التركيز المفرط على إعداد الاختبارات سلباً على نتائج التعلم، ويقلل من دافعية الطلاب، ويتجاهل الإمكانيات التنموية للمدرسين. علاوة على ذلك، فإنه يقيد استقلالية المدرس ويعيق الإبداع داخل الصف.