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### **An Exploration of the Impact of Pre-College English Examination on Instructional Practices of Students in Some Selected Public and Private General Secondary Schools in Ethiopia**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

The main objective of this study was to examine the impact of Pre-College English Examination on the practices of students in some selected government and private general secondary schools in Ethiopia. To achieve this objective, various data collecting instruments were used to collect data. Classroom observations were conducted to look into what teachers' and students' practices looked like. In order to evaluate students' perceptions about the effect of pre-college exam on their practice, questionnaire and focus group discussion were used. To further examine the impact of the exam on teachers' and students' practices, Grade 9 and 10 English syllabi was analyzed. The study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods research design. The subjects of the study were all the 616 grade 10 students from ten government and 160 students from private general secondary schools total 776 students that are found in Hadiya zone, Ethiopia. The collected data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The findings of the study indicated that the pre-college English exam affected the domains of teaching and learning to be exam-focused. The exam had negative wash back on teachers' and students' practices and that made the curriculum planning is not practical.

**KEY WORDS:** ESL, assessment high stake, effect, evaluation

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Exams are the most dominantly used tools of assessment at different levels of educational context. Wolf (1979) mentions the abundant use of tests/exams in the education system in that teachers or institutions mostly rely on tests throughout the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels to assess the processes and outcomes of education. Cheng and Curtis (2004) state that the role of tests in educational system is crucial, and they claim that the vital role of tests maintain in the education sector.<sup>1,2</sup>

There are many researches that have conducted in applied linguistics over different time indicated that tests have an impact on the processes of teaching and learning, professional experiences of teachers, and lives of learners and other stakeholders (Shohamy, 1993; Shohamy et al., 1996; Cheng, 1997, 1998; McNamara, 2000). For a long time, however, this impact of tests was not noticed as a distinct phenomenon in language education. Different Scholars in applied linguistics call this impact of tests on teaching and learning ‘wash back’ or ‘backwash’.<sup>3, 4, 5, 6</sup>

The concept of wash back should be associated with validity. Cheng (2000) refers to wash back validity to describe the “quality of the relationship between testing and teaching and learning”. For Messick (1996), is “part of construct validity and an inherent quality of any kind of assessment, especially when the results are used for important decisions”. Accordingly, Salehi et.al (2011) stresses that “only valid tests which minimize construct irrelevancies can increase the possibility of positive wash back”. Furthermore, Djuric (2008) supports in his detailed study when and if teachers narrow any aspect of the curriculum because of the tests, it results in negative . Positive wash back, on the other hand, is said to result when a testing procedure encourages good teaching practice (Tylor, 2005).<sup>7, 8, 9,10,11</sup>

Different scholars view wash back differently due to the different results of the . Alderson and Wall (1993) show English language tests cause “faster changes in the content of teaching than changes in teaching methodology (cited in (Manjarres, 2009). Cheng (1997) accounts for that brings changes in teaching materials. Andrews et al. (2002) found out “ seems to be associated primarily with “high-stakes” tests, that is, tests used for making important decisions” (cited in Manjarres, 2009). Cheng (2000) reports on how tests are often introduced into the education system to improve teaching and learning. In general, various features have to be regarded to deepen the understanding of , such as the school environment, messages from administration, expectations of teachers, students” needs, and objectives of learners and educational systems (Saif, 2000). Alderson (1986) has indicated that as a predominant phenomenon in the area of language testing which demands researchers to turn their attention to the area. However,

the impact of tests has been interplaying in the teaching and learning process for a long time. In this regard, Cheng and Curtis (2004) state that though the from tests to teaching and learning has been noticed lately, the impact of tests existed since the use of tests as assessment tools.<sup>12,13,14,15,16,17,18</sup>

This educational phenomenon, , comes from the power and authority of tests on the roles or practices of different parties in the system (Shohamy, 1992). Researchers in applied linguistics have discussed the great power of tests in affecting the implementation of the designed curriculum and obtaining the desired learning outcome. Spolsky (1981:5) explains the power of tests, “Tests should be labeled just like dangerous drugs. Use with care!” This implies we need to use tests wisely; otherwise, they could have adverse effects on the teaching-learning process. While describing the power of tests in affecting the implementation of a certain curriculum, Madaus (1988:83) argues, “It is testing, not the ‘official’ stated curriculum, that is increasingly determining what is taught, how it is taught, what is learned, and how it is learned.” This still emphasizes the dominant power of tests on the practices of teachers and students. Furthermore, Alderson and Wall (1993) state that tests exert greater influence in affecting the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of teaching and learning. Hence, tests have a powerful role in affecting the educational processes.<sup>19, 20, 21</sup>

## **2. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The main objective of this study was to examine the impact of Pre-College English Examination on the practices of students and students in some selected government and private general secondary schools in Ethiopia, specifically Hadiya zone. The study specifically tried to:

- Examine the impact of the pre-college examination on students’ practice
- Explore the extent of impact on governmental and private secondary schools students learning practices.

## **3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

In order to achieve the above objectives, the researcher formulated the following basic research questions:

What is the impact of pre-college examination on students’ practices?

What is the extent of impact on government and private secondary schools students learning practices?

## **4. METHODOLOGY**

### ***4.1 research setting***

Hadiya zone is selected using purposive sampling technique. The zone is selected for the reason that the researcher is familiar with the schools. Hadiya Zone is one of the 13 zones and 9 special districts found in Southern, Nations, Nationalities, and Peoples Regional (SNNPR) state. Geographically, Hadiya zone is located at 70 3' 19" - 70 56' 1" north latitude and 370 23' 14" - 380 52' 13" east longitude. Hadiya Zone was divided into 4 districts (Lemo, Soro, Badawacho and Misha) when it joined willingly the SNNPR. Later on three new districts were included namely Shashogo, Duna and Gibe to give effective and efficient administrative and political leadership in 2005/6. The zone was rearranged and three new districts are included namely Mirab Badawacho, Gombora and Anlemo including Hosanna town administration. Now the zone has a total of 10 districts and one town administration (Hosanna) as administrative political unit of the zone (HFEDB, 2009).

Hadiya Zone is bordered in the South by Kembata Tembaro Zone and Alaba Special Woreda, on the West by the Omo River which separates it from Oromiya Regional State and Yem Special Woreda, in the North by Gurage and Silite Zones, and in the East by the Oromiya Regional State with an estimated area of 346,958.14 hectares. Based on the statistical report of the 2007 population and housing census results. Hadiya Zone has a total population of 1243776, of whom 625531 were men and 618245 were women (CSA, 2007).

### ***4.2 research design***

Both quantitative and qualitative data are employed to investigate the of the exam on practices of teachers, students and curriculum planning development (Dornyei, 2007 and Creswell, 2009). This is because researchers in the area of study commented that is a complex phenomenon that needs to be examined through employing different research procedures. In light of this, Cheng et al., (2004) reported that studies in the area of revealed that it is a highly complex educational phenomenon in which its impact is reflected in different domains of teaching and learning (Alderson and Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Watanabe, 1996). Therefore, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods was demanding for this study.

### ***4.3 Subjects of the Study***

The subjects of this study were Grades 10 students who are found in Hadiya zone, Southern Nation, Nationalities and Regional State. This is done due to the ideas that both the teachers' and students' practices had more likely to be influenced by the pre-college English

exam, which was given at the completion of secondary school education. Therefore, students from the selected preparatory schools are included in the study.

#### ***4.4 Samples of the Study and Sampling Technique***

There are 68 general and preparatory secondary schools which are found in Hadiya zone, and 11 secondary schools are private secondary schools. These schools are found in 11 districts and in two administrative towns. Therefore, the researcher selected one administrative town and three districts using simple random sampling techniques so as to select general secondary schools. These are hosanna administrative town, shashogo district, anilemo district and soro district.

The researcher selected 6 governmental and 4 private high schools which are found in Hadiya zone using purposive sampling method to include representatives from all kinds of schools. These schools are selected for two main reasons. First, the schools are found closer to the researcher local setting and work place. Second, the researcher is familiar with the people in these districts to get in-depth information for the study. Therefore, Yakatit25/67, Heto, Bobicho, FA International, Vision Academy, Acelecia, and Harvard secondary schools from hosanna administrative town, Bonosha secondary and preparatory from sheshogo district, gimbichu general and preparatory secondary school from soro district and Fonko secondary and preparatory school from Anilemo district were selected. The sample size of the participants varies according to the type of tools that are used to collect data (Dawson, 2000; Kothari, 2004; Yalaw, 2006).

## **5. RESULTS**

The data analysis is presented in line with the three main teaching domains: Time management practice, learning materials choice and contents of learning of the students.

### ***The impact of pre-college exam on classroom activities /time management practice***

Seven items were specified for diagnosing the effect of pre-college exam in classroom activities/time management practice of teachers in government and private secondary schools. Table 1 shows the mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) as statistical values of TM, reflecting the teachers' viewpoints on the following explained items.

**Table 1 the mean comparison of the effect of pre-college exam on classroom activities /the time management practices of the students in government and private secondary schools**

No	Variables	Government school			Private school		
		N	M	SD	N	M	SD
1	I spend more time to classroom activities that help me perform well in the pre-college exam (EGSECE)	616	4.3425	0.4710	160	4.6688	0.4925
2	I spend more time to practice grammar activities	616	4.6575	0.4710	160	4.6688	0.4925
3	I spend more time to practice vocabulary	616	3.9215	0.4424	160	4.0512	0.4322
4	I spend less time to practice speaking skills	616	4.20	0.5125	160	4.4145	0.6245
5	I spend less time to practice listening skills	616	4.3425	0.47924	160	4.3437	0.47645
6	I spend less time to practice writing skill	616	4.0328	0.8534	160	4.6750	0.46985
7	I spend more time to practice reading skills	616	4.0049	0.81149	160	4.2550	0.71261

The above table 1 illustrates that the mean score of the effect of pre-college exam in the domain time management in government and private general secondary school students. In item 1, it shows that the private school students spend more to classroom activities that help them do well in the pre-college exam (EGSECE) than that of the government general secondary school students and it is indicated in the mean score of 4.66 and 4.34 respectively. This shows that private general secondary school students spend more time to prepare themselves for the public exam than government general secondary school students. With regard to item 2, it can be seen that private general secondary school students believed that they spend more time to practice grammar activities than government general secondary school students and this is indicated in the highest mean value of 4.66 and 4.65 mean score respectively. This implies that the item in the domain has strong effect comparing with others. Item 3 in the above table illustrates that both government and private general secondary school students spend some time to practice vocabulary and the mean score of both the school is nearly the same. Moreover, they believed that they spend less time in practicing of speaking skills in the classroom. Both the school students didn't practice the skills by assuming that speaking skills questions may not appear in the public exam that the students take. In item 5 and 6, in both school students do not practice listening and writing in the classroom. However, in item 7, private general secondary school students spend more time to practice reading skills 4.25 than government general secondary school students that is indicated in the mean score of 4.00 and shows strong effect in the item. This reveals that private general secondary school students practice reading activities more than government general secondary school students. From the analysis, it can be concluded that private general secondary school students are more affected with the impact of pre-college exam than government general secondary school teachers in the domain of time management.

**Table 2 the mean comparison of the Effect of the pre-college exam on learning material choice of the students in government and private secondary schools**

No	Variables	Government school			Private school		
		N	M	SD	N	M	SD
1	I use the textbooks prepared by the Ministry of Education to prepare for the pre-college exam(EGSECE)	616	2.6737	0.46924	160	2.8550	0.56985
2	I refer to exercises/activities from books other than the textbook to review contents expected to appear in the pre-college exams(EGSECE)	616	3.3425	0.47494	160	3.7537	0.6457
3	I practice doing previous years' pre-college exam(EGSECE) questions	616	4.3425	0.47494	160	4.6688	0.47645
4	Before I use supplementary materials, I explore the contents of the pre-college exam(EGSECE)	616	3.9886	0.82138	160	4.1255	0.82407

Table 2 illustrates that the mean and standard deviation of both government general secondary school students and private school students' selection of additional materials in the class that can help them perform well in the pre-college exam. In item 2 in the above table, it clearly shows that private secondary school students refer to exercises/activities from books other than the textbook to review contents expected to appear in the pre-college exams(EGSECE) and it is indicated in the mean score of 3.75 out of the five sub-categories of the Likert Scale, however, government general secondary school students mean score in this item is 3.34 out of the five sub-categories of the Likert Scale which is less than the private general secondary school teachers moderate effect of the item in this school type. Item 4 shows that both government and private general secondary school students explore contents of the pre-college exam before they use supplementary materials that are relevant for the exam, and the mean score is 4.12 out of the five sub-categories of the Likert Scale that shows strong effect of the item. Moreover, the private school students practice doing previous years' pre-college exam(EGSECE) questions in order to make them accustomed to the exam and it is indicated in the mean score of 4.66 out of the five sub-categories of the Likert Scale and the government general secondary school students mean score of 4.34 out of the five sub-categories of the likert scale that implies strong effect of the item in this regard. The above analysis illustrates that both private and government school students' choice of learning materials was influenced by the impact the exam in that it influences them not to practise students with the prescribed text books that were produced locally. The extent of impact in this domain is high in private general secondary school students than government school students.

**Table 3 the mean comparison of the effect of pre-college exam on the learning content of the students in government and private secondary schools**

No	Variables	Government school			Private school		
		N	M	SD	N	M	SD
1	I pay attention to classroom activities that help me perform well in the pre-college exam(EGSECE)	616	3.6575	0.47494	160	4.1255	0.82407
2	I pay little attention to the pre-college exam while studying English	616	2.0162	0.81832	160	3.6563	0.47645
3	While studying English, I focus more on the skills which are more likely to be tested in the pre-college exam	616	4.3425	0.47494	160	4.6688	0.4764
4	I ignore certain parts of the textbook when I study English	616	4.0049	0.81149	160	4.1255	0.82407
5	When I study English, I focus on selected activities in the textbook	616	3.6575	0.47494	160	4.0049	0.81149
6	I cover every part of the textbook when I study English	616	2.0114	0.82138	160	2.5525	0.92407
7	I spend less time on certain parts of the text	616	1.6575	0.47494	160	1.9563	0.49645

The table 3 shows that the extent of the effect of pre-college exam in the learning content of the students in private and government general secondary school students. In this regard, private school students ignores certain sections from the text books and this is indicated with mean score of 4.12 out of the five sub-categories of the Likert Scale that shows the mean score and the government school students have the mean score of 4.00 out of the five sub-categories of the Likert Scale. Moreover, the private general secondary school students focus more on the skills which are more likely to be tested in the pre-college exam and it is indicated in the mean score of 4.66 which is the highest score in this domain. In addition, the government general secondary school students focus more on the skills which are more likely to be tested in the pre-college exam and it is indicated in the mean score of 4.34 that shows strong effect of the item. In the item 5, private school students focus on selected activities in the textbook when they study English and it is indicated in the mean score of 4.00 out of the five sub-categories of the Likert Scale that reveals strong effect in the item and the government school students in this regard is 3.65 mean score out of the five sub-categories of the Likert Scale that shows strong effect of the item in the main domain. From the analysis it can be concluded that the private secondary school teachers are more affected by the impact of the pre-college English exam in this main domain of the teaching contents.

## 6. DISCUSSIONS

This article examines the impact of pre-college English examination on the practices of students in some selected government and private general secondary schools in Ethiopia on three teaching domains: Time management practice, learning materials choice and learning contents.



It was found that the private secondary school students are more affected by the impact of the pre-college English exam in the domain of the learning contents. This indicates that students attempt not only to cover all the sections of the textbook whether they are likely to be tested or not, but they also try to include all relevant content which will help them perform good result in the pre-college exam. The students participating in the study, also, attempted to promote their familiarity with the content and test format.

The study illustrates that both private and government school teachers' choice of learning materials was influenced by the impact the exam in that it influences them not to practice with the prescribed text books that were produced locally. The extent of impact in this domain is high in private general secondary school students than government school students.

It is found that both private and government school students' choice of reading materials was influenced by the impact the exam in that it influences them not to practice students with the prescribed text books that were produced locally. The extent of impact in this domain is high in private general secondary school students than government school students.

The finding of the study showed that the focus area of the students' are seemed to be emphasized to some areas of the languages that appeared in the pre-college exam. Most students spend their time doing grammar and related activities, reading comprehensions, vocabulary exercises and classroom activities that help them to perform well in the pre-college exam in general. Traditional methods in TEFL encourage students to emphasize memorization and grammar instruction, which in turn, highlights the learner's linguistic competence, rather than their communicative competence.

The findings of the study indicate that the participants were negatively affected by the impact of . All the participants of the study need some special training for language assessment. In agreement with Davies (2008), such language assessment literacy involves principles, knowledge and skills.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS &RECOMMENDATIONS**

This article examines the impact of pre-college English examination on the practices of students in some selected government and private general secondary schools in Ethiopia on three teaching domains: Time management practice, learning materials choice, learning contents of the students. A mixed method research design was employed with a questionnaire (778 respondents.)

- ❖ The findings of the study indicate that the participants were negatively affected by the impact of . All the participants of the study need some special attention for language assessment.

- ❖ Teachers should take responsibilities for implementing the designed syllabi though they face challenges from students and other parties to teach to the exam.
- ❖ Accordingly, this article recommends other research works on language assessment should be carried out empirically in the area as so as to deeply assess the issue.

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