

# Wash-back Effects of National Higher Education Entrance Examinations on Students' English Language Learning: In Selected Schools of North Western Ethiopia

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## Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to assess wash-back effect of English grade 12 national examinations on students' English Language learning. The research design was descriptive survey. Questionnaires, document analysis and interview were employed as methods of data collection. The obtained data was analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative data were analyzed by using mean and percentage. The finding of this research indicates that the university entrance examination influenced English teachers not to teach English Language skills like listening skills, oral speaking skills and paragraph and essay writing skills. English Foreign Language in the classroom tailored by higher education entrance examinations. Based on the findings the following recommendations were made. Firstly, English teachers should consider that they are teaching to improve their students' communicative competence. Hence, the neglected skills in the entrance examination in English subject are highly importance to use the language for communicative purpose and they should treat those contents equally with other portions of the course. Next, the school principals should create awareness for the students to learn all English course contents that will important for them to be effective in all other academic courses in their future endeavor. Finally, ministry of Education should give value for grad 11 and grade 12 transcripts while students are being assigned to universities and field of studies and teachers should consider all the course contents in the classroom assessments.

**Keywords:** wash back effect; English language learning; standardized examination; multiple choice; essay writing; oral speaking; paragraph writing; national exam

## 1. Introduction

Ethiopia's need for English language is more intensified as globalization is the agenda of the time, whereas the 'depressing picture of English language teaching' never improved. Lakew (2004) stated that English language in Ethiopia has a significance purpose, in that it is the medium of instruction starting from secondary level of education, it is a compulsory subject throughout schooling and it is an international language which enables the country to communicate with international communities at large.

However, students who join colleges and universities are unable to express themselves in English well; graduates who join the world of work fail to write their own CV and application letters for job. Teachers in primary and secondary schools, and even in colleges and universities lack the proficiency to teach well and become role-models. (Amlaku Eshetie, n.d)

The existence of such English Foreign Language proficiency problem needs to be studied the causes which affect the teaching learning practice in the classroom, and assessment is considered as a driving force for learning taking place. In this regard, Oz (2014) discussed that recently there has been a noticeable paradigm shift in educational assessment where assessment and student learning are viewed as inseparable, and assessment is perceived as a tool for supporting student learning. In the work of scholars (Alderson et al, 2004; Hughes, 1989; Akpinar & Cakildere, 2013) tests or exams have impact on students' learning.

Testing has a growing recognition and has assumed an increasing importance worldwide because education has become an engine for economic growth. Testing, as the gateway mechanism for students, and as a means for monitoring educational quality and efficiency of a nation's schools, has increased in importance. The systems, knowledge, and approaches develop with it. As the testing mechanism change, the teaching methods change with it (Nigusie, 2002).

When we see all the items of Ethiopian national examinations, they are multiple choice questions, and they did not measure oral communication skills (like listening skills and oral speaking skills) and writing skills (such as paragraph writing skills and essay writing skills). In this regard, Nigusie (2002) concluded on content validity the tests that the present Ethiopian national examination items in English Course did not match with the syllabus contents. The current research assessed to what extent the teaching of oral and writing skills were affected due to the lack of content validity on the national examinations. Oral and writing skills cannot be assessed through multiple choice examinations, and EFL examination may have negative influence on the learning of these skills and the classroom assessment teachers were implementing.

The main objective of this study was to assess the wash-back effect of English grade 12 national examinations on students' English Language learning in particular reference to Preparatory Schools of

Administrative Towns in South Gondar Zone.

More specifically, the study intended:

- To assess the effects of higher education institutions entrance examination on the teaching of different English Course contents.
- To evaluate the status of teaching oral and writing skills in comparison with others like reading skills, grammar and vocabulary which can be included in multiple choice items.

## 2. Methods of the Study

This section of research addresses the research design, population, sampling, sample size, data collection methods and data analysis.

### 2.1 Research Design

This study was aimed to assess the wash-back effect of grade 12 national exam on students' learning of the four language skills and the two language areas. In this study the independent variable was grade 12 national examinations whereas the dependent variable was the effects of this exam on the teaching of course contents. Based on the data collected, the research type was both quantitative research and qualitative research since there were data which were analyzed through numbers as well as in words.

### 2.2 Population, Sample Size and Sampling

This study focused on randomly selected five towns of the stated zone. The populations of grade 12 students from the preparatory schools were determined by searching the lists of students in the study schools.

These study schools had total 1783 grade 12 students and 25 English teachers. In students sampling process simple random sampling technique had been used. The teachers had been included in the sample by using comprehensive sampling method since they were small populations.

The sample size was 783 students, plus 25 English teachers included by comprehensive sampling techniques. Total 808 samples were in the study.

### 2.3 Data Collection Methods

In order to gather relevant information, and then to accomplish the objective of this study the researcher used different instruments such as questionnaires, document analysis and interview. The questionnaires were the main tools of data collection.

#### 2.3.1 The Questionnaires

Two different questionnaires were designed and administered to teachers and students separately. The questionnaires were close-ended with Likert scale items.

The first dependent variable to be studied by using the questionnaire was the teaching of course contents. Hence, the questionnaires included items which offer brief information about the practice of teachers towards the implementation of teaching oral and writing skills which was not included in grade 12 national examinations. Also, the data on the teaching of reading skill, vocabulary and grammar was collected through questionnaires for the sake of comparison with the teaching of oral and writing skills.

#### 2.3.2 Interview

Semi structured interview was conducted with two English teachers who were teaching in grade 12. The interview was administered to obtain the detail information which could not be obtained through questionnaires.

#### 2.3.3 Document Analysis

In order to check the contents of grade 12 English Course, the curriculum was reviewed. Furthermore, higher education entrance examinations of at least the last two consecutive years were analyzed. This was the footing step to identify the neglected contents in the classroom teaching.

## 3. Data Analysis and Discussion

This section contains the results which obtained from students' questionnaire, teachers questionnaire and interview. The questionnaires contained five categories of likert scales which were represented by 1 up to 5.

### 3.1 Results from Students' Questionnaire

Table 1 The Mean Value of students' Purpose of Learning English Subject

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.1 To pass national exam	3.65	1.411
1.2 To communicate with others	2.29	.990
1.3 To know grammar rules	3.54	1.292

As stated in the above table, the mean value of the respondents who said they learned English at grade twelve level to pass the university entrance examination is 3.65. Approximately to this with the mean value 3.54 the students respond that they learned English to know grammar rules. In contrary to this, with the mean value 2.4 the students reported that they learned English to communicate with others.

The above data implied that most of the students learn English to pass the entrance examination in the aforementioned grade level. This purpose of learning leads them to focus on learning to know structural rules.

Table 2 The Mean Value of Students' Practice of Learning of Contents which were Excluded from the National Examinations.

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
2.1 Practicing reading comprehension more than speaking and listening	3.56	1.095
2.2 Learning listening according to presented contents in the textbook	3.33	1.240
2.3 Practicing paragraph writing as stated contents in the textbook	2.30	1.138
2.4 Practicing essay writing as stated contents in the textbook	2.28	1.251
2.5 We are given speaking activities as stated in the textbook	2.5	1.263
2.6 Doing role play activity according to the contents in the textbook	2.04	1.252

As it can be seen in the table with the mean value 3.56 the students responded that they were practicing reading comprehension more than speaking and listening. Next, with the mean value of 3.33, the respondents said that they were learning listening according to the presented contents. However, during interview the teachers claimed that they couldn't practice teaching listening due to the listening texts are presented in the students' textbook.

In the third item within the table, with the mean value 2.3 the students reacted that they were practicing paragraph writing as stated course contents in their textbook. In the next one, with the mean value of 2.28 the students said that they practice essay writing according to the presented contents in their textbook. The mean value 2.5 indicated that they are given speaking activities as stated in the textbook. Finally, the mean value of 2.04 represented that students were doing role play activities according to the contents in their textbook.

There for, the results in the above table implied that the English Language contents which cannot be included in university entrance examination were not given emphasis in the classroom language learning too.

Table 3 The Mean Value of Students' Practice Learning Contents which were Included in the National Examinations

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
2.7 Learning grammars more than speaking and writing skills	3.39	1.277
2.8 Learning reading skills more than speaking and writing skills	3.22	1.212
2.9 The teacher focus on teaching vocabulary more than teaching speaking and writing skills	3.00	1.267
2.10 Learning reading skills more than speaking and listening skills	3.03	1.224

As it is presented in the above table, students responded that with mean value of 3.39, they were learning grammar portions more than learning speaking and writing skills. Next, they confirmed that they were learning reading skills more than learning speaking and writing skills which is represented by the mean value of 3.22. In addition, students' response indicated that with the mean value of 3.00 teachers focused on teaching vocabulary more than teaching speaking and writing skills. Further; the mean value of 3.03 showed that students were learning reading skill more than speaking and listening skills.

Hence, it can be concluded that students emphasized learning reading skills, grammar, vocabulary lessons which can be included in grade 12 national university entrance examination. In other words, students paid less attention in learning oral speaking skills, writing skills, and listening skills. This explanation was supported by students' interview.

### 3.2 Results from Teachers' Questionnaire

Table 4 Results on teaching Course Contents Excluded from Examination

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.1 Teaching listening	1.800	.6959
1.2 Teaching oral speaking	2.250	.7164
1.3 Giving paragraphs writing	1.950	.7592
1.4 practicing essay writing	1.450	.6048
1.5 Practicing oral conversation	2.100	.8522
1.6 Practicing role play activities	2.200	1.0052

According to the above table, the mean value of teaching listening skills is 1.8, and the mean of practicing

teaching oral speaking is 2.25. Also, the mean value of paragraph writing is 1.95, and the mean value 1.45 stands for practicing essay writing. The mean value of teachers' response 2.1 indicated that teachers gave oral conversation practice to students, whereas, the mean value of 2.2 showed that teachers ordered students to practice role play activities.

The information implies that the English Language Course contents which were not included in Ethiopian national university entrance examinations also were not emphasized in the classroom teaching.

Table 5 Results on Teaching Contents that could be Included in National Examinations

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
1.7 Giving reading comprehension activities more than giving oral and writing activities.	4.100	.7881
1.8 Spending the time in teaching vocabularies	3.850	.7452

As presented in the table, the mean value of giving reading comprehension activities was 4.1. In addition to this, with the mean value of 3.85, the teachers' response indicated that they were spending the time in teaching vocabularies.

Thus, the explained data implies that teaching reading comprehension and vocabularies are highly practiced.

Table 6 Teachers' Teaching Purpose to Enable Students to pass the National Examinations

Items	Mean	Std. Deviation
2.1. My purpose of teaching English is to enable my students to communicate	3.850	.8127
2.2 My primary purpose of teaching English is to enable students to pass the national examination	4.050	.8870
2.3 My primary purpose of teaching English is to help my students to know grammar portions than listening and speaking	3.850	.5871
2.4 My primary purpose is helping students to practice reading comprehension than practicing oral speaking and listening	4.400	.6806

The above table contains the information regarding to teachers' response on their purpose of teaching English. In line to this, the mean value of 3.85 represented that teachers' purpose of teaching English was to enable students to communicate through English Language. Furthermore; they responded with the mean value of 4.05 their primary purpose of teaching English was to enable students to pass the national examinations. Again, with the mean value of 3.85 the said that their primary purpose to help students to know grammar rules more than practicing listening and speaking skills. Finally, the teachers responded that with the mean value of 4.4 their primary purpose was helping students to practice reading comprehension than practicing oral speaking and listening.

There for, the implication of this result indicates that teachers' primary purpose of teaching English looked like enabling students to pass the aforementioned national examinations rather than improving students' communicative competence.

### 3.3 Results from the Document Analysis

By using the document analysis, the information regarding to the contents which are included in the last two consecutive years grade 12 higher education institution entrance examinations were reviewed. Accordingly, 15.8% of the items were delivered for the students to identify correct sentences order, punctuations, and business letter and research elements. Similarly, 15% of the exam items focused on the reading comprehension questions. In addition to this, grammar and vocabulary items were included 25% and 14.2% respectively. Finally, identifying the correct conversation covered 29.2% of from the total items.

In other words, the above results indicated that in the last two years grade 12 national higher education institution entrance examinations has neglected assessing students' listening skills, oral speaking skills, paragraph and essay writing skills too.

### 3.4 Discussion

Generally, depending on the result obtained from the document analysis, Ethiopian University entrance examination in English Course excluded assessing oral speaking skills, listening skills, paragraph and essay writing skills. In supporting this, the findings from the questionnaire indicated that the classroom teaching was emphasized on reading skills, vocabulary and grammar lessons. However, English teachers neglected evaluating oral speaking skills, listing skills, paragraph and essay writing skills because these skills cannot be assessed through multiple choice items of questions in the university entrance examinations.

The reasons for the above assessment practice found during interview, English teachers explained that they

focused teaching the course contents which can be comfortable to set multiple choice items. According to their thought, they did this to make ready their students for university entrance examinations.

In other words, the classroom teachers underlined that if they teach oral speaking, listening and essay writing skills, their students considered them as ineffective teacher, and the students were reluctant to do the classroom activities. When the teachers were being interviewed, they stated that both students' and teachers' objective was preparing for the university entrance examinations, and this forced them to leave teaching the course contents those cannot be included in the multiple choice examinations.

From this result it can be concluded that the university entrance examinations shaped students' learning implemented in English Course that the teachers' and students' activity tailored to similarly the contents of the multiple choice national examinations by excluding the course contents which cannot be assessed in using multiple choice items.

### 3.5 Conclusions

This research study focused on assessing wash back effects of national grade 12 university entrance examinations on students' learning. The findings implied that national university entrance examinations of English Course affected negatively learning English course contents such as, listening skills, oral speaking skills, paragraph and essay writing skills. These course contents were neglected because of the contents could not be assessed by the multiple choice higher education entrance examination items. This result can be concluded for other countries which assess their students by national written English examinations in multiple choices format only.

### 3.6 Recommendations

Based on the given conclusions, the following suggestions were made.

- English teachers should consider that they are teaching to improve their students' communicative competence. Hence, the neglected skills in the entrance examination in English subject are highly importance to use the language for communicative purpose and they should treat those contents equally with other portions of the course.
- The school principals should create awareness for the students to learn all English course contents that will important for them to be effective in all other academic courses in their future endeavor.
- Ministry of Education should give value for grad 11 and grade 12 transcripts while students are being assigned to universities and field of studies and teachers should consider all the course contents in the classroom assessments.

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### **Declarations**

The author declares that this research manuscript has been researched and composed by myself and it has not been submitted elsewhere and considered for publication. Moreover, the following issues are declared.

- Availability of data and materials

Also, the author declares that on the presented conclusions and research problems, the data and detail information are available if they needed. Further, he would like to confirm that data sharing is applicable in this research article.

- Funding

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- Competing Interest

In this research there is no financial and non financial competing interest since it is a single author's work.