

Pressure to Improve Scores in Standardized English Examinations and their Effects on Classroom Practices

Noor AsmaIffah Zakaria

Faculty of Educational Studies

Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, SELANGOR

Tel: 6013-9060786 E-mail: noorasmaiffah@gmail.com

Arshad Abd. Samad

Faculty of Educational Studies

Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, SELANGOR

Tel: 603-89467278 E-mail: arshad.samad@yahoo.com

Zoharahbte Omar

Faculty of Educational Studies

Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 Serdang, SELANGOR

Tel: 603-89467911 E-mail: zoharah@educ.upm.edu.my

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Abstract

This study surveys English language teachers' pressure to improve students' scores in standardized English examinations and how it has affected their classroom practices. The purpose of this study is to explore the teachers' level of pressure to improve students' performance in the examination. This study also seeks to investigate whether there are any differences in terms of classroom practices between teachers who express high pressure and low pressure. In this study, classroom practices are determined by four variables which are; (i) test preparation activities, (ii) mode of instruction during English lesson, (iii) instructional content, and (iv) teachers' involvement in motivational practices. Responses were analysed using Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) to determine whether there is any

significant difference in terms of the four classroom practices variables and the pressure subgroups. This study found that teachers are pressured to improve students' scores in standardized English examinations. Further, there are significant differences between teachers experiencing high pressure and low pressure in terms of their classroom practices, mode of instruction, instructional content and motivational practices.

Keywords: standardized examinations, pressure, classroom practices

1. Introduction

A standardized test is any test which is administered, scored and interpreted in a pre-determined manner (Popham, 2005). Standardized testing is a common feature of education systems in many countries including Malaysia. The tests have long been used to report students' achievement to parents, policy makers, general public as well as the students themselves. These examinations have been attached to some kind of commonly understandable expectations. The numerical scores obtained from the examinations are considered to reflect the students' capability in the respective areas and will also determine their future pathways. Thus, they are considered high-stakes examinations. This situation has consequently influenced teaching and learning activities in various ways.

High-stakes tests are defined as tests whose results are seen by students, teachers, administrators, parents or the general public as the basis upon which important decisions are made that immediately directly affected them (Madaus, 1988). Sacks (1999) and Kohn (2000) used the terms high-stakes tests to refer to tests upon which consequences have been attached. High-stakes tests such as school-leaving examinations, national-standardized school examinations, or university-entrance examinations are capable to directly or indirectly influence the education system. These tests involve a set of determining functions in the candidates' life ranging from employment and promotion to placement and achievement (HadiSalehi et al., 2011).

In recent decades, however, the attention given to the standardized examinations have increased dramatically. The impact of high-stakes tests on teaching and learning context have been discussed in a number of previous studies. Those in favour of high-stakes testing argue that attaching stakes to tests is inevitable to hold schools accountable, reward high performing schools, and identify failing schools so they may be targeted for extra help (Wright, 2002). However, Amrein and Berliner (2002) argued that results from high-stakes tests are not necessarily indicators of achievement. While high-stakes test may show increased scores, there is little support that such increases are anything but the result of test preparation and/or the exclusion of students from the testing process (Amrein & Berliner, 2002). Findings in a study on high-stakes tests conducted by Haney (2000) also have not seen authentic learning gains. Further, there is clear tendency for students to study for a test by reviewing past tests and concentrating their efforts on the types of language and test items that are known to appear on such tests (HadiSalehi et al., 2011).

2. Pressure to Improve Scores and Classroom Practices

In the countries practicing standardized curriculum and examinations, test scores are often the sole means of describing and judging schools. It has been well discussed in previous studies that test scores from a standardized test can have important consequences on teachers and students. These consequences have subsequently caused a lot of pressure on teachers. For example, Madaus (1985) and Herman et al. (1990) stated that test scores from standardized examinations have been used as a basis in making important decisions which are attached to significant consequences for teachers, such as in terms of promotion and funding. Herman et al. (1990) coined the term ‘accountability pressure’ to refer to the teachers’ pressure related to the standardized tests and their implications.

The pressure on teachers to improve their students’ scores is influenced by many factors such as the administrators’ involvement, teachers’ professional self-concept (Fish, 1988), the publication of the test results and the schools’ expectations (Smith, 1991). The pressure that they had to face has in turn influenced the nature of teaching and learning in the classroom. Smith (1991) further elaborated that the publication of test scores which produces feelings of embarrassment, guilt, and anger in teachers and the determination to do what is necessary to avoid such feelings. The strained feelings among teachers associated to tests lead to the determination to do what is necessary to avoid such feelings. Teachers react to the pressure by “teaching to the test”, teaching content with reference to the previous years’ tests, drilling using test-like worksheets (Shohamy, 1991) and the use of regular teaching hours to prepare students for the test. They engage in a variety of activities to prepare their students and at the same time prevent themselves from the accountability pressure of the test.

In the Malaysian context, according to Ong (2010), pressure is laid upon teachers to produce high test performance results in much teaching to the test. In another study conducted by Marimuthu, Mukherjee and Jasbir (1984), the examination-oriented education system governed the teaching and learning behaviour of nearly half of the teachers and students in their study. This situation encourages the adoption of teaching methods designed to prepare students for the test so as to achieve good results in the standardized examinations regardless of whether these practices promote actual learning. Teachers are similarly affected as indicated in a study by Zaiton et al. (2011) where the concerns of the teacher respondents centred on “the integration of the tests with activities that take place in the classroom” (p. 119).

Apart from that, the school administrators have also turned out to be the source of pressure to improve students’ scores among teachers. They apply pressure on teachers to keep scores high, raise them, or exceed the previous years’ achievement. Madaus (1988) further mentioned that the pressure on teachers is in fact associated to the value attached to the test. Romberg et al. (1989), as cited in Herman and Golan (1991), concluded that “the greater the consequences attached to the test, the more likely it would be to have impact on teaching”.

Nevertheless, teachers also suffer anxiety because they cannot control what the pupils do on the tests or what characteristics of the pupils assigned to them will be but at the same time have to deal with the expectations of the administrators. The findings in the study by Herman

and Golan (1991) also revealed that many teachers believe test scores are not necessarily related to good or bad teaching, but reflect the socioeconomic standing of the pupils or their native intellectual abilities.

Further, Fish (1988) has mentioned that teachers' professional self-images are negatively related to the pressure they feel to raise the test scores. The practice of cramming the curriculum and concentrating on those skills and content most amenable to testing finally demeans the sense of professionalism among teachers (Madaus, 1988). Jones, Jones and Hargrove (2003) in Schulz (2008) found that instructional practices had changed to adapt to the demands of the test and in many cases left the teacher questioning the value of their profession. Popham (2005) further mentioned that the profession has been jeopardized because of unethical practices in testing environment in striving for acceptable scores which include cheating during the test and also designing instructions around tested items. In the Malaysian context, Lewey (1977) stated that due to the education system which places too much stress on examination, regardless of any changes in the teachers' attitude or curriculum employed, they are still compelled by the standardized test and will teach according to what will be tested.

3. Background of the Study

The education system in Malaysia is very centralized in almost all aspects including the selection of teachers, curriculum and syllabus, textbooks and also assessment. Curriculum planning and development have been conducted at the federal level and the national education system is centrally administered (Rahimah, 1998). This centralisation becomes a vital mechanism to ensure that all government policies are implemented through education system (Government of Malaysia, 1976).

In the Malaysian context, standardized national examinations are perceived as high-stakes examinations. Throughout their primary and secondary school years, Malaysian students sit for as many as four national standardized examinations. They are *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* or Primary School Assessment Test (UPSR), *Penilaian Menengah Rendah* or Lower Secondary Examination (PMR), *Sijil Peperiksaan Malaysia* or Malaysian Certificate or Education (SPM) and *Sijil Tinggi Peperiksaan Malaysia* or Malaysian Higher School Certificate Examination (STPM). Results from these examinations have been used as the major yardstick in assessing students' performance. Various decisions including placement in the residential schools, attendance at premier science schools, and award of scholarships are made based on these results (Ong, 2010). Among those who are directly affected by this situation are the students themselves, teachers and also parents. The environment in the education system expects them to emphasize good performance in the examinations, which is considered the only valid measures of academic attainment. The results of standardized examinations not only offer information about the performance on an individual student, but are often aggregated to establish a measure to evaluate teachers and schools' performance. Thus the students' performance in the test will not only risk their own individual performance, but also the school and teachers.

4. Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

1. What are the levels of pressure felt among teachers to improve students' scores in standardized English examinations?
2. Is there any difference between teachers who express high pressure (HP) and low pressure (LP) to improve students' scores in standardized English examinations in terms of the following aspects:
 - a. test preparation activities?
 - b. mode of instruction?
 - c. instructional content?
 - d. motivational practices?

5. Methodology

This study adopted a quantitative approach using an explanatory research design. This descriptive study employed the survey method that was designed to investigate teachers' pressure to improve students' scores in standardized English examinations.

5.1 Population and Sampling Procedures

The target population of this study are secondary school English teachers in two districts in Selangor Darul Ehsan; Petaling Perdana and Petaling Utama. The population statistics was obtained through the assistance and cooperation of the Statistics Officer at the Selangor Education Department (*Jabatan Pelajaran Selangor*). At the time of the survey, the total number of secondary schools in the two mentioned districts is 69. This number is inclusive of secondary schools, secondary vocational schools and religious schools. Based on the data provided by the Selangor Education Department or *Jabatan Pelajaran Selangor*, there are 683 English teachers teaching in these schools.

The study employs multi-stage sampling procedure involving both cluster sampling and random sampling (Cohen, 2007). It is also being referred to as cluster random sampling. In the present study, at the first stage, the two districts (Petaling Utama and Petaling Perdana) were not arbitrarily selected. The researcher first assigned each school a number and then randomly chose the schools. The schools were selected using the fish bowl technique. The researcher had to repeat the procedures a few times in order to achieve the targeted number of sample. For each round, ten schools were selected. Questionnaires were distributed to all English teachers in the selected schools. These procedures were repeated four times in order to obtain the achieved sample. Using this procedure, 36 schools were finally selected with 244 English teachers as the sample of this study.

5.2 Instrument and Scoring

The instrument for this study was a two-section self-administered survey questionnaire

specially devised for the purpose of gathering data in the research. The instrument was adapted from two studies which are the National Survey of Teachers conducted by Pedulla et al. (2003) and a study by Herman and Golan (1991).

5.3 Data Analysis Procedures

Prior to the data analysis, two steps of data preparation analysis were applied which were the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) and dichotomization of independent variables into nominal data. These procedures were used to make sure that the data collected were assessed in terms of its construct validity and also set in such a way that it can be analysed according to the research question of the study.

In this study, the data was first screened prior to the actual analysis to gather information about the interrelationships among a set of variables (Pallant, 2005). The exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted on the 78 items. This analysis is an attempt to identify a small set of factors that represents the underlying relationships among a group of related variables. EFA is often used for examining construct validity and construct equivalence as has been evidenced in a number of studies involving cross-cultural research and psychometric theory (Laher, 2010). In the present study, all the items were factor analysed for the second time after deleting these items.

Further, the study would like to investigate whether the respondents' classroom practices are determined by the different levels of pressure felt among the respondents. For this purpose, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used. Thus, this independent variable which appears to be continuous data has to be first dichotomized into categorical data.

6. Findings and Discussions

In this section, the findings of the study will be discussed. The discussion is organised according to the two research questions.

6.1 What are teachers' levels of pressure in relation to standardized English examinations (SEE)?

Overall, teachers report feeling moderate to strong pressure from various parties including the school administrators, school inspectorates, parents and their own expectations as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistic of Pressure to Improve Scores in SEE

	Statement	Mean	SD
1	Teachers feel pressured from the school inspectorates to raise scores of English in the centralized examinations.	3.78	.820
2	Teachers feel pressured from parents to raise scores of English subject on the centralized examinations.	3.51	.936
3	Administrators in my school believe students' centralized English examination scores reflect the quality of teacher instruction during English lessons.	3.82	.818

4	The centralized English examination encourages teachers in my school to teach in ways that contradict to their own ideas of good educational practice.	3.46	.974
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Based on Table 1, the strongest source of pressure are the school administrators and school inspectorates. The respondents' strongest source of pressure is found to be the school administrators, more specifically when the administrators view the test scores as a reflection of their performance. It is interesting to note that respondents were unhappy when their administrators view their students' results as a reflection of their English teaching quality. Further, respondents felt lesser pressure from parents to make sure that their children scored high in SEE. Apart from that, the expectations attached to test which required teachers to teach in ways that contradict their own beliefs of good educational practices have caused pressure to them as well.

The above table and elaboration indicate that teachers are generally dealing with pressure to improve students' scores in standardized English examinations. This finding is consistent with the previous study by Herman and Golan (1991) and Jones and Egley (2004). However, the study generated further information from the teachers on this issue whereby they found many teachers believed that test scores are not necessarily related to good or bad teaching, but reflect the socioeconomic standing and intellectual abilities of the students. Teachers were found to be suffering from anxiety because they cannot control the characteristics of students assigned for them. Jones and Egley (2004), who concluded that the situation is the unintended consequence of the tests, agreed that making educators accountable for students' performance may cause pressure on teachers.

The findings in Table 1 also revealed that teachers feel a moderate amount of pressure from parents to raise the score of English in the standardized English examinations. This is consistent with the previous study by Herman and Golan (1991) who found that teachers reported feeling pressured by parents to make sure students perform well in the examinations.

Further, teachers in the present study agreed that the standardized English examinations have caused them to teach in ways that contradict their own ideas of good educational practices which lead to pressure on these teachers. This finding also indicates that, from the respondents' perspectives, the examinations do not promote good educational practice in the daily English lessons. This might be rooted in the nature of the test as well as the content and skills covered in SEE. It might also be due to the expectations imposed on teachers whereby they are expected to gear their teaching towards preparing students for the tests. These results are consistent with those of other studies. For example, Pedulla et al (2003) found that the accountability issues and stakes of the tests required teachers to 'teach to the test'. Such an environment eventually has caused pressure among teachers since it contradicts their beliefs of good teaching practices.

6.2 Is there any difference between teachers with high pressure (HP) and low pressure (LP) in terms of test preparation activities, content of daily English lesson, modes of instruction and

involvement in motivational activities?

In terms of the overall classroom practices, this study obtained statistically significant difference between the HP and LP subgroups. This is based on the value of Wilks' Lambda 0.859 with a significant value of 0.000.

Further, the following table is the MANOVA comparisons between LP and HP subgroups extracted from the Tests of Between-Subject Effects output box. Since Wilks' Lambda value in the Multivariate tests of significance show significant result, thus it is worth to further investigate separate analyses for each dependent variable.

Table 2. MANOVA Comparisons between LP and HP Subgroups

Classroom Practices	Pressure		Sig (*)
	LP	HP	
Test preparation			.000
Mean	3.8431	4.2002	
SD	.89922	.60708	
Mode			.065
Mean	3.3237	3.4924	
SD	.61845	.77591	
Motivation			.000
Mean	3.1946	3.6182	
SD	.69045	.56647	
Content			.000
Mean	3.7411	3.9697	
SD	.8648	.51845	

Note:

*Significant at $p < 0.05$

As shown in Table 2, the sample's classroom practices differ significantly according to the level of pressure caused by the standardized English examinations except for modes of instruction. The results show that there is no significant difference between LP and HP teachers and the modes of instruction they employ in their English class. The mean scores for both groups of teachers indicate a slight difference with the LP teachers employ modes of instruction which are in line with SEE more as compared to teachers with HP.

Meanwhile, there is a significant difference between LP and HP teachers in terms of all the other three dependent variables which are test preparation activities, coverage of content during English class and their involvement in motivational activities. The results indicate that teachers with HP are involved in various test preparation activities to a greater extent as compared to LP teachers. The activities include drilling on the items that are similar to those in the test, reviewing past years' examination questions and teaching test-taking strategies.

Further, the results in Table 3 show that the teachers with LP and HP to improve scores in SEE differ in terms of the content that they cover in their English class. Teachers with HP seem to focus their lessons according to the area covered in the SEE to a greater extent with the mean score 3.9697 as compared to teachers with LP. Lastly, results also show significant difference between teachers with LP and HP towards the SEE in terms of their involvement in the motivational activities. Teachers with HP are more involved in motivating students to perform better in the SEE.

The above findings are consistent with several previous studies. For example, Alderson and Hamp-Lyon (1996) in their study of washback on the impact of TOEFL stated that tests affect both what and how teachers teach. However, Cimbricz (2002) argues that testing does affect the teaching content or what might be taught, but not necessarily how the content was taught. This idea is consistent with the findings of the present study whereby the teachers' pressure to improve scores in SEE does affect what they teach and not significantly how they teach.

Apart from that, both HP and LP subgroups indicate that they carried out test preparation activities almost consistently throughout the year. In the study by Herman and Golan (1991), they found that teachers and schools administrators use a variety of test preparation strategies regardless of the type of schools since the test scores were used to compare and evaluate all students and schools. However, in the national survey by Pedulla et al. (2003), they found that the degree of adopting test preparation activities differ according to teachers' perceptions of the stakes or importance of the examination. This is in line with the idea by Madaus (1988) and Romberg et al. (1991) when they stated that the pressure on teachers in this context is associated with the value of the test and the greater the consequence attached to the test, the more likely it would have impact on teaching.

Further, as discussed earlier, the strongest source of pressure in this study is when the school administrators view students' performance in SEE as a reflection of the teaching quality. Thus, due to such an environment, teachers with more pressure tend to focus their teaching on the tested area as the findings for the instructional content in Table 3. According to Shohamy (1991), the pressure among teachers associated to tests lead to the determination to do what is necessary to avoid such feelings. In respond to this situation they react to the pressure by 'teaching to the test'.

7. Conclusion

Based on the findings of the current study, teachers' classroom practices are found to be significantly influenced by their pressure to improve scores in standardized English examinations. The findings indicate that classroom practices of teachers' who expressed high

pressure are more affected as compared to those who expressed less pressure. The test preparation activities, instructional content, mode of instruction and motivational activities are the areas of classroom practices where teachers' responses differed significantly by the pressure expressed to improve students' scores. In sum, this study suggested that teachers have to be aware of how the pressure that they facing to improve students' scores can affect various aspects of their teaching. Apart from teachers, other parties such as the school administrators, parents and inspectorates should also be well-informed of how their expectation on teachers with regards to the students' performance in examinations is in fact a potential source of pressure which encourages test-influenced teaching and stress among teachers. In a standardized testing environment, schools send out messages to their teachers about the importance of good performance in the examinations and test-curriculum alignment, teachers are expected to design their instructional programmes with such alignment in mind (Herman & Golan, 2001). However, whether the teachers' pressure in producing good scores and the degree of attention given to the test-gearred teaching signal meaningful learning, it remains another critical issue for further investigation.

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