

# The Washback Effect of a High-stakes EFL Examination on Third-Year Secondary School Students' Preparations, Strategies, and Practices in Misrata – Libya

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## Abstract:

The influence of high-stakes examinations on teaching and learning is known as washback. The phenomenon remains under investigation in various aspects of language teaching and learning. High-stakes examinations may lead students to concentrate on exam preparation and cause them to shift towards test-oriented strategies rather than genuine knowledge acquisition. The purpose of this research study is to investigate the impact of the Secondary Education Certificate Examination in English (SECEE) on students' preparations, strategies, and practices vis-à-vis the studied exam. To this end, a mixed-method approach was employed, utilizing questionnaires with 100 students and semi-structured interviews with 5 students and 7 teachers. Findings revealed that students were learning for the exam and neglecting the actual knowledge acquisition. Furthermore, students adopted test-oriented strategies, emphasizing test-related materials, rote learning, and mock examinations, with tutorials and family support playing vital roles in their exam preparation. This study's finding added to pertinent literature new insights into the notion of washback to the learner, filling a gap in this domain, particularly in the Libyan context. The findings also provide valuable insights for educational stakeholders and more importantly for teachers and curriculum designers in language education in general and the Libyan education system in particular.

**Keywords:** SECEE, Students' Practices, Examination, Preparation Strategies, Washback.

## تأثير الامتحانات النهائية في مادة اللغة الإنجليزية على استعدادات واستراتيجيات وممارسات طلاب شهادة إتمام مرحلة التعليم الثانوي

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### الملخص:

يعرف تأثير الامتحانات، النهائية ذات الأهمية الكبيرة، على التدريس والتعلم باسم "التأثير المرتد" والتي يشار إليها بمصطلح "washback"، حيث تبقى هذه الظاهرة قيد دراسات بحثية عديدة في مختلف جوانب تدريس اللغة وتعلمها. الامتحانات النهائية ذات الطابع المهم والتي لنتائجها أهمية كبرى على مستقبل الطلاب تجعل الطلاب أحياناً يركزون جل تعليمهم على التحضير لهذه الامتحانات، والذي يتبعه تحور في طريقة التعلم، من تنمية المهارات المعرفية إلى اتباع استراتيجيات تعليمية تتبع نهج والطرائق المبنية عليها هذه الامتحانات. يهتم هذا البحث بدراسة مدى تأثير امتحانات شهادة إتمام مرحلة التعليم الثانوي في مادة اللغة الإنجليزية على ممارسات التعلم السلوكي للطلاب بسبب هذه الامتحانات. وتحقيقاً لهذه الغاية، تم اتباع منهجية متعدد الأساليب، النوعية والكمية، باستخدام استبانات لعدد 100 طالب وإجراء مقابلات مع 5 طلاب و7 معلمين لغة إنجليزية. كشفت نتائج الدراسة أن الطلاب كانوا يربطون تعلمهم للمادة الدراسية بناءً على ما في الامتحانات ويهملون اكتساب المعرفة الفعلية. علاوة على ذلك، اعتمد الطلاب على استراتيجيات موجهة نحو الاختبار، مع التركيز على التفاصيل المتعلقة بالاختبار، معتمدين على الحفظ المجرد، والامتحانات التجريبية، والدروس الخاصة، كما كان لدعم الأسرة دور حيوي في التحضير لهذه الامتحانات. أضافت هذه الدراسة إلى حقل المعرفة رؤى جديدة

حول تأثير الامتحانات على الطلاب، وسد فجوة في هذا المجال، لا سيما في البيئة المدرسية بليبيا. كما أن هذه الدراسة تقدم رؤى قيمة للمهتمين ببرامج وطرائق تدريس وتقييم اللغة الإنجليزية، على المستوى الدولي والمحلي، من معلمين ومصممي المناهج وواضعي الامتحانات النهائية، وأصحاب القرار بهذا الخصوص.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** استعدادات الطلاب، الامتحانات، استراتيجيات التحضير، تأثير الامتحانات.

## 1. Introduction.

The washback of high-stakes examinations has been hotly debated and profoundly investigated by scholars since the 1990s due to its multifaceted nature. In their eminent article "Does washback exist?" Alderson and Wall (1993) overtly defined washback as the effect of testing on teaching and learning. To dive deeply into the washback perimeter, "Washback refers to a range of complex, unplanned phenomena which occur around assessment processes and the impact upon learning and teaching" (Dawadi, 2021, p.1).

High-stakes tests are external assessments administered and scored by external agencies, with decisive consequences or influence on test-takers (Hoque, 2011). These tests are characterized by their use of a single test score, which is used to make critical decisions about students' educational preferences (Alqahtani, 2021). Rahman et al. (2021) stated that the scores of these tests are used to evaluate students and assess schools, while simultaneously used by parents and schools to evaluate teachers.

In this context, high-stakes exams are external exams: These are final written examinations, large-scale public exams, prepared and administered conclusively by the relevant personnel of the Libyan Ministry of Education only to two cohorts of students: the first is taken by Grade Nine of the basic education known as the Basic Education Certificate English Examination (henceforth BECEE). The second exam is taken by Grade Three students at the end of their secondary education, known as the Secondary Education Certificate English Examination (henceforth SECEE), which is our focus in this study. These exams are achievement tests, quantifying students' achievement in the teaching materials they studied during the whole school year (Onaiba, 2014). A large-scale or high-stakes test refers to an assessment that is administered to a large number of individuals, usually at a regional, national, or international level. These exams often have standardized formats and scoring procedures, allowing for the comparison of performance across a wide population. Abdulhamid (2019) further described the SECEE as a high-stakes test that makes life-

changing decisions for Libyan students.

The impact of high-stakes tests on stakeholders can be both positive and negative. Research has shown that these tests can motivate student learning, but they can also lead to a focus on drill activities (Schissel, 2018). On one hand, washback can be positive providing a beneficial change in teaching and learning, specifically in examinations, reflecting the positive washback. On the other hand, washback can be negative leading to harmful consequences or "undesirable effects" (Alderson & Wall, 1993, p.5). Negative test influence occurs when learners or students prioritize a narrow and superficial grasp of knowledge over critical thinking, creativity, and thorough understanding.

High-stakes exams, which have serious repercussions for different stakeholders, particularly students, have the potential to affect their practices to great extent. The term practices in this paper refers to the activities, strategies, and techniques students engage in to prepare for their SECEE. Students' practices include the learning strategies and study approaches that students adopt to fulfil the learning demands, probably, this adoption is based on their perceptions of the test and its significance.

An area of scholarly debate that has garnered significant attention is the detrimental influence of assessments in general and exams in specific on students' learning and preparation practices. This harmful influence emphasizes a prioritization of rote memorization over critical thinking, stifling creativity and inhibiting a deep understanding of the subject matter and ultimately diminishing the intrinsic joy of learning a new language.

## **2. Previous Studies.**

Previous empirical investigations conducted globally suggest that high-stakes exams can remarkably affect and shape students' study habits and their learning strategies as well as they can limit the students' creativity and knowledge (Abdulhamid, 2019; Al Hinai & Al Jardani, 2021; Canli & Çakir, 2022; Dawadi, 2021; Desalegan et al., 2023; Dong & Lui, 2022; Dong et al. 2021; Ferman, 2004; Rahman et al, 2021; Tayeb et al., 2014; Tsagari, 2011; Tsang & Isaacs, 2022). Researchers highlight the impact of exam stress on student choices, emphasizing the importance of a balanced approach for academic success and learning outcomes. It is vitally important to note that due to space constraints in this paper, not all studies on the subject matter could be reviewed.

To begin with, Abdulhamid (2019) conducted a mixed-methods study on the relationship between exam alignment and the washback effect in an EFL context. The study employed an explanatory sequential design, using questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and observations of both teachers and students. Abdulhamid's study emphasised alignment concerns and teachers'

perspectives and a narrow focus and attention were given to the learners and their attitudes towards the examination. Moreover, Abdulhamid (2019) reported that students concentrate heavily on passing exams. Students' target was passing the exam rather than benefiting and enjoying the learning experience, constantly asking the teachers about the exam content and what to pay attention to, resisting teaching approaches that did not relate to the exam, preferring a teacher-centered, grammar-focused curriculum, and asking for clarification and information in their native language. Overtly, students focused and adopted a traditional approach for their exam preparation as they believed that it would be best to help them succeed on the high-stakes SECEE exam. Similarly, Tsagari, in her (2011) study concluded that "Students expressed a strong desire for predictability according to their teachers. They wanted their teachers to provide them with 'repeated items' and they would get upset if their teachers were not able to prepare them adequately for what was to come in the exam" (p.436).

Furthermore, investigating the factors that may come into play to determine the washback effect of high-stakes tests was a primary objective for some researchers. For instance, Dawadi (2021) conducted research concerning the factors influencing the washback of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) English test on students and parents in Nepal. The aim was to understand the nature of washback within the educational, cultural, political, and social contexts in which the test operates. Data was collected through oral diaries (n=72) and semi-structured interviews with students and parents (n=24). The results revealed that the (SEE) English test provoked students to prioritize memorization over language skills acquisition and development. The historical and sociocultural factors play vital roles in this reliance on rote memorization within Nepal's ELT context, emphasizing drilling and translation over communicative skills.

Unlike this current research, which included the teachers as a secondary source of information and report, Dawadi included the parents along with the students as target data collection source. Moreover, whereas Dawadi's study emphasised the role of the mediating washback factors, the present research concentrated on examining the strategies and practices changes and shifts that occur because of the SECEE without concerning any mediating factors. This current research shares similarities with Dawadi's study by exploring the washback effect of high-stakes language tests at the secondary phase. However, the studies differ in their methodology, emphasis, and focus. Similarly, Rahman et al.'s (2021) study investigated the "Washback of Assessment on English Teaching-Learning Practice at Secondary Schools". This study aimed to explore the washback of the English examinations on English teaching and learning practice at secondary schools in Bangladesh. Qualitative research employing

interviews with English teachers, FGDs with students, and classroom observation protocol) was conducted in 12 secondary schools. Interestingly, Rahman et al.'s study revealed that students dedicated half of the academic year to mastering test-taking strategies for the studied test. Classroom instruction was geared towards exam-specific techniques, reflecting the dominant influence of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning practices in Bangladesh.

Our research study shares with Rahman et al.'s study a common focus on examining the impact of high-stakes examinations on students' practices in English language education. However, Rahman et al.'s study focuses on secondary schools in Bangladesh, while the current research focuses on secondary education in Libya. Another key difference that could affect the research process, is the methodological choices, the sample sizes, and data collection methods that are differently designed in both studies. Whereas our research specifically investigates students' practices and strategies for the exit exam in Libya, Rahman et al.'s study examines the washback of the English examinations on teaching and learning practice, covering wider angles of the language test washback.

In similar vein, Tsang and Isaacs (2022) also researched Hong Kong secondary students' perspectives on selecting test difficulty level and learner washback. This study explores the washback effects of the graded approach of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education English Language Examination (HKDSE-English) on learning in a high-stakes school exit examination. The study combines focus groups and a questionnaire to gather data from secondary students. They examine learner perceptions and reported behaviours, as well as beliefs and language learning experiences, regarding the graded approach of the HKDSE-English examination. The study also considers the role of other stakeholders in the washback mechanism and socio-educational forces. The findings unveiled that students preparing for the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE)-English exam engage in specific exam preparation practices: engaging in informal, self-directed preparation activities outside of regular classes focusing on specific exam content, giving selective attention to certain areas of English language learning, dedicating time to paper-and-pencil drills, and enrolling in private, exam-focused tutorial classes to supplement exam preparation, demonstrating a desire for specialized instruction beyond the traditional classroom setting. Tsang and Isaacs's (2022) study is similar to this study in that both consider the learners' aspects regarding the washback phenomenon, but some differences are highlighted in the methodology and the context parts respectively.

Moreover, stakeholders' behaviour associated with large-scale tests was an area of research focus in the literature. In this regard, Saehu et al. (2017)

conducted a study titled "The Washback of the Final Test on Students' Learning Behaviour". An in-depth analysis was employed to the data collected from the questionnaires, observation, and interviews. In this case, 83 students took part to fill in the questionnaires, and 10 students were interviewed to confirm the findings from the questionnaire. He authors discovered that students adjusted their learning behaviours in response to exams, adopting various strategies to control exam-related stress and enhance their academic growth and development. These strategies included dedicating additional time to structured study, using supplementary materials like worksheets and TOEFL resources, practicing online exercises, seeking advice from teachers, engaging in informal educational settings, and collaborating with fellow students. On the other hand, some students resorted to undesirable actions, like forming study groups with teachers to engage in cheating.

The current study and Saehu et al's study both concentrate on assessing the behavioural changes of students. Both studies aim to understand how high-stakes tests affect students' behaviours and practices providing valuable insights for improving English language education. However, the current study's educational context and standards are different, in addition to the methodological differences between the two studies could bring about diverse results and findings.

It is to claim here that, students across different contexts showed behaviours influenced by high-stakes exams, and commonly adopted exam-driven strategies and approaches, prioritizing intense exam preparation over deep and creative knowledge acquisition and learning. Their practices are restricted to only memorization-focused approaches in Nepal and intense test-specific strategies in Bangladesh, content-specific learning, and intensive practice for high-stakes exams in Hong Kong, and Libya and could be in other different educational contexts not mentioned in this paper due to the space constraints. However, this focus on exams often hinders broader learning and language development.

The current study aligns with prior research highlights how such examinations affect and shape students' strategies and learning approaches. By focusing on the specific context of Libya, this research is a valuable extension and substantial enrichment of the existing studies on washback conducted by Onaiba (2014) and Abdulhamid (2019). These previous studies in Libya significantly concentrated on washback in teaching, teachers, and teachers' instructional practices and curriculum. Indeed, the present study shared similarities with these two previous studies in that it investigates the washback effect of high-stakes exams in Libya. While Onaiba's study investigated the washback of the BECEE and barely mentioned the BECEE washback on

learners and students, the current study's primary focus is the washback of the SECEE on students and their preparation practices and strategies. Furthermore, Abdulhamid's research also focused on alignment concerns, teachers' perspectives, and learners' attitudes towards the SECEE examination, the current study centers on students' experiences and preparation practices for high-stakes exams. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the washback effect on learning and learners as has been asserted by many researchers in the field (Pan, 2014; Rahman et al, 2021; Thanh, 2020). Moreover, research is scarce concerning the students' experiences, strategies, and practices as indicated by the existing literature. Thus, this study aims to fill this gap by investigating in what way the SECEE as a high-stakes exam influences students' study habits, strategies, and practices

Considering the existing washback studies, this research specifically investigates learner washback and not any other aspect concerning the washback phenomenon. It not only adds to the studies conducted in Libya, but also it adds valuable insights to the wealth of washback studies conducted globally in different contexts, as presented above. Although this study shares similarities with other research that examines behavioural changes and the strategies students employ for their high-stakes exam preparation, it differs in its context, primary focus, and methodology. It specifically aims to investigate the washback effects of high-stakes exams on students' practices, offering a unique and targeted perspective on the washback on learning and learners, the washback on students in the Libyan educational context. By searching this distinct aspect solely and more profoundly, the present research has made a significant contribution to the influence of high-stakes examinations on student strategies and practices in a distinct context. This study contributes to the vast washback area, which has a paucity of research from learners' perspectives.

### **3. Context of the Current Study.**

The testing context for this study is the Secondary Education Certificate English Examination (SECEE), a high-stakes exam that carries significant implications for its stakeholders. In Libya, after three years of compulsory schooling, i.e. by the end of the secondary education stage, thousands of students take the SECE in all their school subjects, one of which is the SECEE, the exam we focus on in this study. Successful completion is a prerequisite for pursuing a university education.

### **4. Objective of the Study.**

The primary objective of this research is to examine the washback effect emanating from SECEE on students' preparation methodologies, strategic approaches, and study habits in anticipation of the SECEE in Misrata Secondary Schools. The present study attempts to provide graspable, informative data



about how they adapt certain strategies to accommodate their exam preparation. The conclusions are drawn according to the students' responses and teachers' research involvement.

### **5. Research Questions.**

The present study aims to address the following research question

- 1- How does the SECEE influence students' preparation strategies and practices?
- 2- In what ways do students adapt their study practices in response to the SECEE?

### **6. Methods.**

A research design that merges both quantitative and qualitative methods was deemed necessary when examining the washback of the high-stakes examinations (Spratt, 2005; Onaiba, 2014; Ahmmmed and Rahmanm 2019). More specifically, the washback of the SECEE on students' practices, study habits, and preparation strategies. As Watanabe (2004) described washback as a complex phenomenon, it requires a multifaceted approach to gain a comprehensive understanding of its intricacies. Adhering to the recommendation of Bailey (1999) to utilize both quantitative and qualitative methods to neutralize the shortcomings of certain approaches, a mixed-methods approach was employed in this study. This research design acknowledged the importance of considering the broader context as providing numerical data. However, the qualitative method was predominantly utilized to offer a wide and deep perspective, allowing for rich and descriptive data (Leavy, 2017). By capturing the learners' preparations, practices, and experiences, this approach provided valuable insights into the impact of the SECEE.

#### **6.1 Participants and Setting.**

The study was conducted in three female schools located in Misrata, Libya. These schools were Fatima Alzahra School, Kirzaz for Girls School, and Zahrat Alwatan School. These schools were chosen for their representation of different educational environments and their inclusion of SECEE candidates. A total of 100 female students aged 17-18 were included as participants in the quantitative questionnaire, 75 students (75%) were from the scientific section, while 25 students (25%) were from the literary section. This distribution suggests that a majority of the participants in the study were from the scientific section.

For the qualitative interviews, five students were selected to gain deeper insights into their individual experiences and perceptions of the SECEE effects. The selection criteria for these students were based on voluntary participation in the interview part. In addition, the researchers also included seven teachers who teach the English language in Misrata secondary schools. Their insights and

perspectives on the influence of the SECEE on students' strategies and practices were deemed precious and appreciated in providing a different and in-depth grasp of the subject matter. The involvement of teachers was based on their accessibility during the pre-exam period, which resulted in a diverse representation of educators from both the schools where the students were selected and other schools within the Misrata district. However, to ensure ethical practices, participants were assigned pseudonyms, and researchers guaranteed that their responses would not cause them harm in any way.

### 6.2 Instruments.

The researchers utilized both Likert-scale questionnaires and semi-structured interviews to obtain data from different and multiple sources and to provide graspable and adequate data for the two research questions. Furthermore, the triangulation of participants involving both students and teachers are also used to provide diverse perspectives about the topic under investigation and to enrich the research findings.

Students were given a 22-item Likert scale questionnaire to assess their practices for the SECEE to gather quantitative data. The questionnaire was specifically designed to measure students' practices, and it was evaluated and examined for its reliability, resulting in a high Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.841. In addition to the quantitative data, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and students to deeply investigate how the SECEE examination influenced the students' practices. The semi-structured interview was used as a supplementary method to the quantitative questionnaire, which served as the primary and fundamental data collection tool. By combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods, this study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the diverse impact of the SECEE examination on individuals involved in the educational context.

**Table (1): Reliability Statistics**

<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	<b>N of Items</b>
0.841	22

The questionnaire was provided in both English and Arabic languages to ensure all students could understand and respond effectively. English was used as the original language, with Arabic translations provided below each item for easy comprehension. This helped bridge any language barriers and improve communication between the researchers and participants, particularly for those with limited English proficiency. To complement the questionnaire data, qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted with teachers and students to delve deeper into the washback effects of the examination on practices. The researchers utilized audiotaped interviews to ensure that no

valuable information was missed during the data collection process. By recording the interviews, the researchers could go back and review the recordings, allowing them transcribing and analysing the data more accurately. Additionally, this method allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of the participants' experiences, as their responses and perspectives were captured in their own words and tone of voice. The use of both data collection tools provided a comprehensive understanding, combining structured quantitative data with rich qualitative insights to capture the complexity of participants' experiences and practices effectively.

The motive behind this choice was to gain deeper insights and elaborate responses about the students' preparation practices for their SECEE from both teachers' and students' perspectives. A semi-structured interview as defined by Goerge (2022) is a technique for gathering data where questions are asked based on a predetermined set of themes, but the specific order and wording of the questions may vary. Furthermore, it is noteworthy to mention that the researchers conducted a pilot study before the actual data collection process, the researchers were able to refine the research instruments for improved validity and reliability, adjusting questionnaire items for clarity and optimizing interview questions for comprehensive responses enhanced the credibility and accuracy of the instruments.

### **7. Results and Analysis.**

The quantitative data collected from the administered Likert-scale questionnaires were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Statistical profiling and characterization such as frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were computed to summarize the participants' responses. The participants responded to The Likert scale questionnaire by indicating their level of agreement or disagreement with the statements on a numerical scale. The qualitative data obtained from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were carefully reviewed to identify recurring themes and patterns. The researchers identified common themes by grouping related codes. These themes represented patterns, and concepts that emerged from the interviews.

In this study, for the quantitative data, a graph is used to show students' responses in the form of letters and percentages. Following the graphs, a detailed schedule is provided to explain the full statements of the data presented in the graphs. Subsequently, an analysis of the qualitative data is also provided.

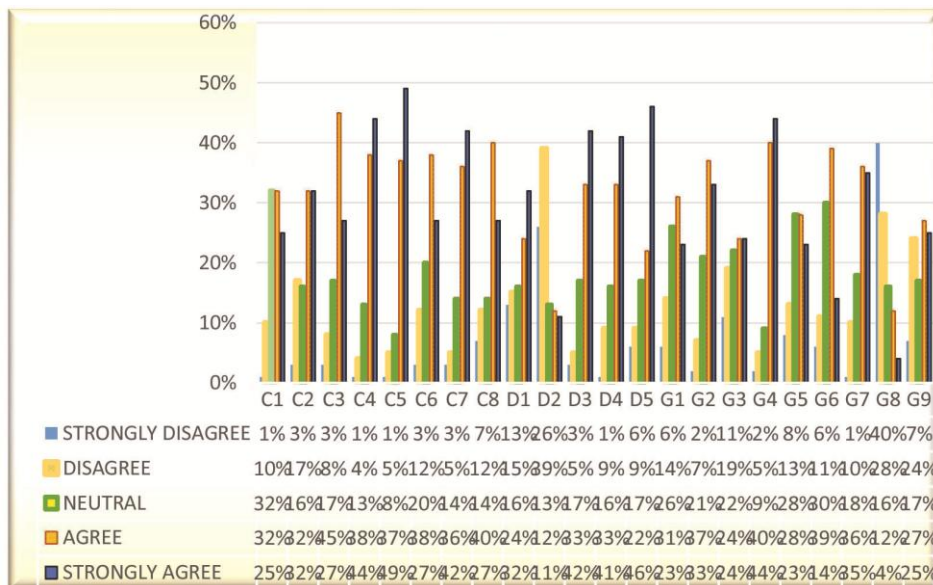


Figure (1): Students' Responses about the SECEE washback on their Practice

Table (2): The table displays the complete sentences corresponding to the data shown in the graph

Questionnaire items concerning students' practices
<b>C- What do you do for the SECEE preparation inside the classroom?</b>
I pay immense attention during classes and do plenty of exercises
I ask the teacher to provide me with worksheets to review content expected to be in the SECEE
I request guidance from other classmates
I ask the teacher to give us model tests before the final examination
I ask the teacher for kind of a mock examination
I frequently ask the teacher what will be included in the SECEE
I ask for the teacher's Consultation
The teacher makes us practice and solve the questions of the past examination
<b>D- What kind of out-class activities if any you do for the SECEE preparation?</b>
I enroll in private tutorial classes and test preparation courses
I skip classes to study for the SECEE
I practice items at home, which are similar in format to those in past examinations

I search for previous rote answer
I contact my classmate and friends and ask for group collaboration and joint efforts to prepare for the SECEE
<b>G- In what way does the closeness of the SECEE impact your learning practices (learning styles and learning activities)?</b>
I make new study plans
My learning becomes more exam-oriented as the exam gets proximate
I take intensive training (e.g., paid- coaching classes) before the SECEE
Because of the short time left for the SECEE, I start relying on the test related materials, such as test papers, past questions, and model questions and answers
I start ignoring the tasks and activities that are not directly related to passing the examination
I ask the teacher for test-taking strategies for time exploitation
I depend on memorizing the SECEE content as much as possible
Cramming for the test is all that I do for the SECEE preparation
The test proximity forces me to learn for the test, which is a way contrary to my aim of language proficiency.

In this analysis, the researchers examined the responses from students regarding their SECEE preparation strategies and the impact of the exam's proximity- the short time remaining for the exam- on their learning practices. The data was categorized into three axes: C, D, and G, representing SECEE preparation inside the classroom, out-class activities for SECEE preparation, and the impact of SECEE closeness on learning practices, respectively.

The highest-scoring item across all axes was C5, with a mean score of 4.280. 49% strongly agreed with seeking mock examinations from teachers. In axis D, item D4 had a 41% "Strongly Agree" response rate and a mean score of 4.040 for searching for previous rote answers. Lastly, in axis G, item G4 received a 44% "Strongly Agree" response rate and a mean score of 4.190 for relying on test-related materials due to the approaching SECEE exam. In summary, the analysis reveals that items C5, D4, and G4 received the highest mean scores, indicating their significance and effectiveness in students' SECEE preparation. These findings highlight that students make use of these prominent strategies for exam readiness and preparation.

Qualitatively, the researcher examined the influence of the SECEE on students' practices based on their responses to a series of questions. The analysis identified several themes that emerged from the students' and teachers' answers, including the learning styles and the role of test-centered materials, sources of support, and exam practices and obstacles hindering this preparation. These

themes shed light on how the SECEE's proximity influences students' practices, highlighting the challenges they face and the strategies they employ.

**Theme 1: test-centered materials:** When asked about the extra work or pressure they perceive from the SECEE, the students shared their strategies and experiences, students reported relying more on memorization (rote learning) and collecting past examination papers as a means of practice, for instance, one student reported *"I find it beneficial to collect past examination papers as a means of practice"* and another student said, *"Collecting model exams has been really helpful for me in preparing for the SECEE"*. Nada added that they also utilize online summaries and dedicate more time to private tutorials outside the school and translation of the curriculum.

**Theme 2: SECEE preparation:** Teachers observed various learning styles and activities exhibited by students, including active involvement in practicing with model tests, participation in workbook exercises and oral work, and increased self-dependence and engagement in tests, quizzes, and tutorials. Some teachers mentioned that students express a desire to be taught specifically for the SECEE, focusing on content and skills directly assessed in the exam, rather than a broader language proficiency development. As Teacher Huda explained, *"When students approach me, they often explicitly mention their desire for targeted test preparation. They commonly request assistance in focusing solely on the content and skills that are directly assessed in the exam"* and she added that her students *"ask for strategies and techniques that can help them excel in answering specific types of questions, emphasizing a need for direct alignment between classroom instruction and the SECEE"*.

This suggests a tension between teaching to the test and teaching for broader language proficiency, as the pressure to achieve high scores on the SECEE sometimes leads to a shift in teaching and learning focus, as noted by Teacher Omar: *"I have noticed that students frequently express their preference for a curriculum that aligns closely with what they expect to encounter in the actual exam"*.

**Theme 3: Sources of support:** This theme revolves around the sources of support the students have in their SECEE preparation. Student 1 mentioned taking responsibility for their own preparation but also receiving help from their teacher and some relatives. Student 2 specified that their mother helps them in their preparation. Student 3 stated that they prepare alone and do not receive assistance from others. Student 4 reported receiving help from relatives and cousins. These responses indicate that students receive support from various sources, including teachers, family members, and peers, but some students rely on self-study.

## 8. Discussion.

During the research, the researchers meticulously examined the strategies and practices employed by students in their preparation for the imminent SECEE exam. The students were found to be engaged in;

- Rote learning.
- Test- related materials.
- Mock examinations.
- Private tutorials outside the school and family engagement.

The researchers utilized mixed methods to collect the essential data for this research question, extracting information from both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The above-mentioned points are discussed sequentially in the following paragraphs.

The findings reveal that SECEE students changed their learning approaches and adopted a range of strategies commonly observed in high-stakes exam contexts. The students engaged in pure test-centered learning as the exam date got nearer. It was also found that various strategies were employed by students to cope with exam-related stress and enhance their academic development. Students faced with a high-stakes exam tend to choose activities mainly intended for test orientation or test-specific coaching. This particular result and the result of Rahman et al. (2021) concord on the premise that learner washback is predominately test-oriented, penetrates facets of learning, and leads to a narrowing of the curriculum and superficial learning. These findings indicate that learners learn to the tests, supporting the view that what is not tested is ignored.

The findings primarily obtained from the questionnaire indicated that students adopted memorization as a test-oriented strategy to prepare for their SECEE. Subsequently, the interviews further corroborated these results by eliciting similar responses. As the exam date approaches, students tend to rely more on rote learning, which is the process of memorizing information without understanding its underlying meaning. This is often driven by the pressure to perform well on the upcoming exam. This finding goes in parallel with prior studies of Tsagari (2011), Abdulhamid (2019), and Dawadi (2021) who corroborated that the pressure to perform well in exams has triggered the adoption of temporary or short-term or tactics where memorization takes priority over deeper comprehension and actual knowledge acquisition.

Another key finding of this study concerning the students' practices is that students tend to focus on exam-related materials, such as past exams, summaries, and review guides, as the exam date approaches. Both questionnaires and interview data showed that students tended to prioritize studying materials directly related to the exam format and content. The heavy

reliance on exam-related materials, such as practice exams and past exam papers, is another characteristic of exam-centered learning.

Furthermore, mock exam practices are another exam-related preparation strategy revealed in this study. The quantitative data collected through the questionnaire indicated that students perceive mock exams as effective tools for assessment and preparation, indicating their reliance on these practice tests to assess their readiness for the actual exam. This research finding aligns with prior research conducted by Onaiba (2014), Rahman et al. (2021), and Ahmmed and Rahman (2019) as they highlight the significance of mock exams as effective preparation strategies for students.

Students interviewed expressed their priority of studying these materials as a means to acquaint themselves with the format and content of the forthcoming SECEE exam. Students stated that studying these materials is crucial for familiarizing themselves with the format and content of the upcoming SECEE exam. They explained that using these resources helps them gain a deeper understanding of the exam's requirements and enhances their proficiency in understanding its content, aligning their preparation with the expectations of the SECEE exam. Furthermore, the teachers who were interviewed reported the same about their students favouring and engaging in exam-centred learning while they were preparing for their SECEE to be able to meet the future demands of the exam.

The last aspect of the students' practices while preparing for their upcoming SECEE exam is their preference to engage in private tutorials outside of school and seek additional support from their families, including parents, siblings, and cousins. The interview results from both teachers and students revealed that students actively participated in tutorials as part of their exam preparation strategy. This particular finding is echoed by other studies' findings such as Ferman's (2004), Dong et al. (2021), and Dong Liu (2022), all reported a range of strategies that students utilize to adequately prepare for tests. Consequently, one may contend that as the exam date approaches, students may become more focused on managing their time effectively and prioritizing their study efforts towards exam-oriented behaviour. This issue can be an interesting area of future research.

By actively engaging with tutorials and seeking additional support, students demonstrate their adaptability and dedication to their studies, even in challenging circumstances. Students also reported that they receive external support from their family and relatives and cousins. This aligns with Dawadi (2021) research about the importance of external support which result in increasing the motivation of students to work for their assessment. Therefore, social and external support is a feature of washback in Misrata society.



The researchers' joint analysis of the data revealed a remarkably negative washback on students' practices, where students directly cast an emphasis on learning to pass the exam, narrowing the curriculum to specific skills being tested, and neglecting the overall endeavour of mastering the language and curriculum objectives as this goes in line with Canli and Çakir (2022), and Tsagari (2011) who stated that students pay immense attention on exam-focused strategies rather than language learning and use; learners favoured, demanded, and engaged in exam-oriented teaching and practices built specifically around the target exam. Thus, it can be deduced that test preparation significantly influences language classes, with students themselves favouring activities geared towards the exam rather than activities aimed at enhancing their language abilities.

However, a contrasting finding from studies conducted by Al Hinai and Al Jardini (2021) Saehu et al. (2017), and Tayeb et al., (2014) reported that students altering their learning practices and strategies, devoting more time to test preparation activities which suggests the presence of positive washback among students. The students exhibited increased dedication and applied better learning strategies, and they engaged in more effective strategies rather than test-oriented strategies to prepare for high-stakes exams, such as establishing study groups and learning collaboratively to enhance their preparation efforts.

### **9. Conclusion.**

To sum up, the findings of this study about students' practices revealed a remarkable change in the students' learning styles and strategies during their SECEE preparation. It was observed that students tended to shift towards a purely test-centered approach while preparing for their exams, focusing solely on the content they believed would be tested. However, amidst these complexities, there is a glimmer of positivity. The fact that students modify their strategies while they are preparing for their SECEE suggests specific adaptability and responsiveness to the examination requirements. This adaptability can be seen as a positive aspect, indicating that students are aware and can recognise the demands of the SECEE and adjust their study habits accordingly.

To recap, the washback phenomenon is undeniably complicated and multifaceted, as indicated by the research findings. The SECEE's impact on students' practices and strategies is significant as students adopt test-centered strategies for their exam preparation. Nonetheless, students' ability to adapt their strategies demonstrates a potential for positive change. This study's findings further indicate that understanding and addressing the complexities of washback is crucial for educators, policymakers, and stakeholders to avoid its negative effects and enhance a balanced and supportive educational environment.

Based on the results discussed in this study, future research could focus on exploring the factors influence students' shift towards test-centered approaches. Future researchers may conduct Longitudinal and comparative studies to assess the long-term impact of students' adaptive strategies and understand how students approach their SECEE. This research provides valuable insights for teachers, educators, policymakers, and curriculum designers to enhance the overall learning and assessment experience for all students.

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