A Testing-laden Culture:
A Critical Review of English Language Testing in the Libyan Education System

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Abstract:

This paper presents an overview of language testing in the Libyan context by providing an overview of how tests are implemented and how tests are conceived by different stakeholders including teachers, students, and parents. It also shows that tests in their present forms reflect the policy-makers' either ignorance of or irresponsibility towards English language education. The paper illustrates how tests in this context derive from traditional paradigm of assessment, mainly influenced by the behaviourist learning theory. The sole focus in tests is measuring the sum of knowledge gained rather than students' analytical ability or critical thinking. This, apparently, resulted in a 'testing culture' with a focus on preparation to tests that distort the curriculum and the education process in general. The paper attempts to provide some recommendations to change this line of thinking pervasive towards the objective of testing where tests are a means for teaching through real and serious teacher preparation and awareness raising. This should be mainly led by the education ministry through revisiting the education policy to locate learning as an objective of assessment rather than teaching as a means to preparation for tests. So, following an analytical, descriptive methodology, this paper attempts to describe the status quo of English language tests in Libya, unravel the factors that shape it and synthesise it with literature to provide a reconciliation of assessment reform and the dominant exam culture, creating a niche for this reform.

Key words: Tests, testing culture, learning culture, the Libyan education system.

ثقافة مثقلة بالامتحانات:

مراجعة نقدية لامتحانات اللغة الإنجليزية في نظام التعليم الليبي

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الملخص:

تقدم هذه الورقة لمحة عامة عن اختبار اللغة في السياق الليبي من خلال تقديم لمحة عامة عن كيفية تنفيذ الاختبارات، وكيف يتم تصور الاختبارات من قبل مختلف أصحاب المصلحة بما في ذلك المعلمين والطلاب وأولياء الأمور. كما يوضح أن الاختبارات في أشكالها الحالية تعكس إما عدم معرفة صانعي السياسات أو عدم مسؤوليتهم تجاه تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية. توضح الورقة أن الاختبارات في هذا السياق (الليبي) مستمدة من النموذج التقليدي للتقييم، متأثرًا بشكل أساسي بنظرية التعلم السلوكي. التركيز الوحيد في الاختبارات هو قياس مجموع المعرفة المكتسبة بدلاً من قدرة الطلاب التحليلية أو التفكير النقدي، وقد أدى ذلك بوضوح إلى ثقافة الامتحانات مع التركيز على التحضير للاختبارات التي تشوه المناهج وعملية التعليم بشكل عام. تحاول الورقة تقديم بعض التوصيات لتغيير هذا النمط من التفكير السائد تجاه هدف الاختبار ألا وهو أن الامتحانات أصبحت وسيلة للتدريس. يكون هذا التغيير من خلال إعداد المعلمين وتوعيتهم بشكل حقيقي وجاد. يجب أن تقود وزارة التعليم ذلك بشكل أساسي من خلال إعادة النظر في سياسة التعليم بحيث يكون التعلم كهدف للتقييم بدلاً من التدريس كوسيلة للتحضير للامتحانات. لذلك يحاول هذا البحث وصف الوضع الراهن لامتحانات اللغة الإنجليزية في ليبيا، وكشف العوامل التي تشكله للتوفيق بين إصلاح طرق التقييم وثقافة الامتحانات السائدة، مما يخلق مكانًا مناسبًا لهذا الإصلاح.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الامتحانات، ثقافة الامتحانات، ثقافة التعلم، ليبيا.

Introduction:

The influence of testing on teaching and learning as well as education and society is clear. This is represented in the terms washback and impact which designate different levels or areas of influence. The level and scope of influence that washback and impact have on testing lie mainly in the stakeholders influenced. Tsagari and Cheng (2017) advise that research needs to shift focus

from washback to impact which deals with influence of tests on the macro-level of society. Therefore, this paper deals mainly with the impact of tests which affects the parties primarily other than learners and teachers. This is approached through the lens of testing culture pervasive in Libya and how this testing culture shadows the education process- focusing in this paper on English language education, though might be extended to tests in other areas of education in general. This paper tries to shed light on the culture of testing prevalent in Libya on the level of society. This is dealt with in the light of the sociocultural theory of learning as it can be argued that this theory opposes and counteracts the traditional paradigm of assessment dominant in the Libyan context. It starts by presenting the development of tests by looking at the different paradigms behind different modes of testing in order to locate the testing that is widespread in the Libyan education system. It then argues the power that tests can exercise on different stakeholders, then focuses on the influence of testing on the macro-level- that is the influence of testing on stakeholders other than learners and teachers. The paper follows this with delineation of the situation of testing in the Libyan context to provide a picture of the testing tradition followed. It then presents some recommendations based on the researcher's own experience and derived from literature in an attempt to draw the attention of personnel in office to the deterioration prevalent in the testing arena in the country.

Paradigms of assessment:

This section presents a review of the two paradigms of assessment. Assessment that has been used as a means to test or evaluate the outcome of what teachers teach to students falls under the old paradigm which states that in such tests the focus is on language, teachers are in control, product is emphasised at the cost of process and such tests test only rather than teach (Richards and Renandya, 2002, p.335). However, they add that nowadays assessment has witnessed considerable change in direction where the focus is on communication, tests are now learner-centred, and skills are integrated rather than each skill being tested separately for evaluating students' product. Moreover, tests nowadays are directed and exploited to help learners become involved in and take responsibility for their learning. This refers the new paradigm of assessment. Richards and Renandya (2002, p.335) present the differences between the two paradigm as follow:

The old paradigm	**The new paradigm**
Focus on language	Focus on communication
Teacher-centered	Learner-centered
Isolated skills	Integrated skills
Emphasis on product	Emphasis on process
One answer, one-way correctness	Open-ended, multiple solutions
Tests that test	Tests that also teach

In this next section, I present how tests were influenced by language learning theories and how they developed.

The development of testing:

In the past, language assessment was neglected, performed as an act of testing, and only teaching received due focus. Teaching and assessment were considered separately (Viengsang, 2016). Brown and Abeywickrama (2018) note that during the middle of the twentieth century, behavioural psychology and structural linguistics had considerable influence on teaching and testing. Testing was then concerned with grammatical rules, vocabulary items and translation from first to second language employing multiple-choice, fill in the blank, true false questions. Such tests are still found nowadays especially in contexts with high-stakes tests. However, there was a shift towards emphasising language use in language tests during the mid-1980s. However, with the advent of communicative language teaching, discontent with the previous two paradigms and shortcomings of standardised tests gave rise during the 1990s to alternative assessment which showcases triangulation of students data being continuous, untimed, contextualised, individualised and formative. This puts to question the traditional testing culture where testing is seen as a way of measuring the sum of knowledge students gained from a course of study disregarding their abilities to function or employ that knowledge in real life situations. Therefore, recently, due to different influences particularly the dissatisfaction with traditional forms of testing, the widespread of English as well as the influence of the sociocultural theory, assessment and evaluation in the ELT field have seen a major paradigm shift affecting teachers, learners and classrooms. (Davison & Cummins, 2007). Therefore, Tsagari (2021, p.25) states that language assessment moved from the traditional, cognitivist approach to language, to communicative approach and then to intercultural approach. In the same vein, Hidri (2016) and Inbar-Lourie (2017) argue that the relation of teaching and assessment has witnessed a great shift as a result of the advent of the sociocultural theory of learning. This trend or shift of focus from testing to assessment is presented by Inbar-Lourie (2008) as a shift from 'testing cultures'

to 'learning cultures', highly geared by the influence of Vigotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning.

The power of tests:

Shohamy (2007) argues that 'language tests are often introduced in a top-down manner as devices that define and impose language knowledge and create de facto language policies.' (p.522). Therefore, when these tests are imposed on the school level, students and teachers normally succumb and become sole implementers of the testing policy producing teachers teaching for the test and students studying for the test. Such a pedagogy victimises and kills the innovation which education should instil in learners depriving them from opportunities of good education. The way tests are envisaged in the society is evident in literature. For example, Karatas and Okan (2021) show that when test takers consider high scores on tests to be the means for attaining good economic and social values, they attribute high importance to tests where 'tests turn into powerful tools playing central roles in their lives. Therefore, they themselves contribute to generating the power of tests.' (p.88).

The influence of tests extends to teachers whose students' success is reflected in these teachers' reputation and are considered successful teachers. Brown and Abeywickrama (2018) put it as: 'A teacher in such a school might actually be superb, and that teacher's students might make excellent progress through the school year, but because of the test-driven policy, the teacher would receive no reward or recognition at all.' (p.106). This is because teachers are judged on the basis of their students' grades in exams.

Parents are also influenced by how well their children do on a test attributing success in tests to their parenting (Karatas & Okan, 2021) which forms a source of praise and pride for these parents. Parents also judge schools by how proficient their children are in the English language (Shohamy, 2007).

Next, I discuss how tests influence different stakeholders on the level of society.

The influence of high-stakes testing at the macro-level:

Tests exert considerable power on the practice of learning and teaching and on teachers and learners and their behaviour (e.g. Black, 1999; Menken, 2017; Shohamy, 2001). Shohamy (2001, p.15) states that tests can have detrimental effects as they 'can create winners and losers, successes and failures, rejections and acceptances'. Tsagari (2021, p.28) argues that 'the most powerful factor in assessment practices is the wider educational and cultural conceptions of assessment'. Black (1999) notes that assessment can have a summative or a formative function, the latter is mostly neglected both on the micro- and macro-

levels. For this reason, this paper deals with the effects of tests at the macro-level situation of ELT in Libya.

One dimension of testing that has a considerable influence on language learning and teaching is high-stakes testing which Menken (2017, p.386) describes as 'a single test score … used as the main or sole factor in determining significant educational decisions.' However, before proceeding to discussing the impact of high-stakes tests, it is imperative to clarify how impact and washback are tackled in literature on testing and assessment. Tsagari and Cheng (2017) delineate these as follow:

> Washback is more frequently used to refer to the effects of tests on teaching and learning at the classroom level. Impact refers to the effects that a test may have on individuals, policies, or practices, within the classroom, the school, the educational system, or the society as a whole. (p.359).

Spolsky (1976 as cited in McCallu 2021, pp.34-35) argues that traditional language testing has been shaped by the psychometric-structuralist approaches which frame traditional language testing in objectively scored items and final results that are quantifiable and drive decision making processes. This then results in the epistemological supposition held by stakeholders such as parents, that tests are the landmark of achievement and the measure of learning of children. This is referred to by Inbar-Lourie (2008, p.387) as 'testing culture', widely plaguing the Libyan society. In the same vein, Menken (2017) argues that based on results of students on high-stakes tests, teachers, schools and entire school systems are evaluated and judged by governments. In such cases tests become 'a policy tool to affect the knowledge that students will be expected to acquire and the knowledge that teachers will be required to teach in schools' (Shohamy, 2001, p.28). Segers, Dochy and Gijbels (2010) differentiate three kinds of effect: pre-assessment effect which refers to the influence of assessment on learning before taking that assessment, so it precedes assessment. Post-assessment effect refers to the backwash effect of assessment on students learning. Pure-assessment effect means the potential of students to develop their thinking and cognitive ability through feedback and feedforward by teacher or peers.

More of the influence high-stakes standardised tests exert on stakeholders is discussed in the next section about the situation of tests in Libya.

The status quo of testing in the Libyan context:

In the Libyan education system, pupils start the primary stage at the age of six which extends for six years followed by three years of preparatory school level and the secondary school level for three years as well. Tests are typically

internal to schools, that is these are prepared by individual teachers at the schools where they teach. However, the third year of preparatory level and the third year of secondary level exams are normally unified on the level of the country and are prepared by the examination centre annexed to the secretariat of education, therefore, these tests are set and marked externally to the schools. In these tests, students are seated in desks, hear some instructions, and to answer the questions they colour with their pencils the square of their choice, underline an option from a small number of choices, or tick true or false options to complete the exam sheet. English language tests at these levels are normally typical of measurement for students' ability to pass the exam through evaluating these students sum of knowledge gained during the school year or semester. Students grades are primarily derived from and based on their performance in tests with teachers left with a marginal share of grades to bestow to students- mostly according to these students' attendance, obedience and quietness in the classroom. There is a widely held belief among people that these tests represent a turn in the students' academic career. The preparatory level end exam decides which kind of institute the student can join such as- and normally- technical institutes or secondary schools and their grades determine which branch, literary or scientific, the student can enrol in. Also, the secondary level end exam determines whether students are qualified to enter university or higher technical institute, and what department. Therefore, tests form a rite of passage for students from an early age (Shohamy, 2007). Beliefs about the importance of exams are not limited to which specialisation the student is qualified for, they represent a source of success and fulfilment for students, their parents, their teachers, the school as well as the school head-teacher where a school whose students obtain high grades on these tests is considered a good school and the head-teacher to be classified as a success. Therefore, they form a high level of accountability.

Although the material employed for teaching the English language at the Libyan schools is based on and designed to be presented through the communicative approach, this did not guarantee that tests are aligned to the material employed. Previous to communicative language testing which started in the 1980s, tasks were artificial and did not represent real language use which necessitate authenticity. However, in the Libyan context, tests remain dominant and their effect on learning and teaching is still prevalent, resulting in distorting teaching and learning by the testing tradition. As Shohamy (2007, p.529) asserts 'Even when a richer and more appropriate curriculum exists, it often becomes subordinate to the power of the test.'

Black (1999) draws attention to the difference between summative and formative purposes of assessment and argues that although testing in its

summative sense has less direct effects on learning, these effects remain powerful. Madaus (1988) presents principles of test influence on teaching and learning. The reason for presenting these six principles here is that they are highly prevalent in the context of this paper, Libya. First, the more a test is importantly perceived by teachers, students and administrators, parents and the general public, the more it will be used to make important decisions that affect them. Therefore, such tests will direct their attention and focus on the test rather than learning and teaching. Second, the more a test is used as a social indicator for decision-making, the more it is to distort and corrupt teaching and learning. Third, important decisions made on the grounds of test results eventually drive teaching and learning, where teachers teach to the test and students study to the test and therefore teaching becomes limited to what is to be on tests. Madaus (1988) attributes this to the tremendous social pressure exerted on teachers. In this position, teachers cannot afford but to teach to the test. Fourth, in a context of high-stakes tests, past tests prevail and hence determine what is taught and learnt. In this, argues Madaus (1988), 'When the teacher's professional worth is estimated in terms of test success, teachers will corrupt the measured skills by reducing them to the level of strategies in which the examinee is drilled' (p.40), extending the effect to students and parents who will corrupt the process by expecting success on the test. Fifth, a consequence of the previous weaknesses of test-driven instruction, is that teachers become concerned with test formats that are inherent in previous exams. Examples include multiple-choice questions and filling in the gaps. This results in types of question items used in test governing instruction rather than development of knowledge or skills. Sixth, test results become the main indicator and determinant factor of students' future, leading to sole concern and focus on passing tests and obtaining marks rather than gaining knowledge.

One of the main sources of test power come from test-takers themselves, as Karatas and Okan (2021) argue when individuals are judged on the basis of their performances on tests, tests turn into powerful tools playing central roles in their lives. Therefore, they themselves contribute to generating the power of tests. A consequence as presented by Brown and Abeywickrama (2018) is accountability where test results are used to hold schools the responsibility for improving students' academic achievement and identifying schools which need improvement. They add that this is one the harshest criticism to standards-based assessments (p.102). In this sense, Black (1999) argues that summative forms of testing are an important source for creating accountability.

Discussion and recommendations:

This parts presents a discussion of the previous parts and tries to present some recommendations to solve the problem of high-stakes standardised tests dominance and their detrimental effects. The development of assessment started from dominance of behaviourist theory of learning and the testing traditions derived from it and accompanying it to the rise of socio-cultural theory and the changes it offered to testing. However, it is evident that testing in the context of this paper still follows traditional paradigm of assessment in spite of the introduction of material based on the communicative approach which, as Buck (2001, p.83) notes, necessitated the move towards communicative testing. This traditional situation of testing still prevails forming a testing laden culture. Tests are the main incentive and motivation for teaching and learning, gaining high grades are the goal for students, teachers, head-teachers and parents. This victimises teachers and students being exclusively judged by the results of standardised tests prepared by the examination office, by persons who are either outsider to the field or are ignorant of the detrimental effects such tests exercise on these parties and the education system as a whole. This, of course, embodies the centralisation of test preparation with teachers being ignored the right to put to practice their experience and knowledge of their students' needs and competence. It is so, now what can be done? Who should be held responsibility for developing such a testing culture? The main qualifier is the education policy with tests being an indication of success. An education policy with high-stakes standardised tests leads to tests prevailing over teaching and learning and limits micro-level stakeholders'- mainly students, teachers and parents- focus and concern on preparation for and passing exams. Tests are necessary but, in their summative form, they should not be the only nor the main means for measuring the achievement of students or the professionalism of teachers. Therefore, assessment should be at the hands of teachers to overcome the centralisation of tests held by the examination board where teachers do not have any contribution. Rather, teachers are only disseminators of knowledge that is targeted by the tests imposed from the top of the pyramid, the education ministry. In this sense, Madaus (1988) suggests 'a reduction in the bureaucratization of teaching' where 'schools must receive waivers from high-stakes testing programs' (44) to alleviate the influence of tests. Also, for assessment to be aligned with the curriculum, it should manifest teaching besides its measurement objective by adopting the formative mode of assessment. This is in line with Shepard (2000) who argues that for assessment to fulfil its learning function 'it is important to recognize the pervasive negative effects of accountability tests and the extent to which externally imposed testing programs prevent and drive out thoughtful classroom practices' (p.9), otherwise,

assessment will remain an end in itself rather than a means and a tool for learning.

Although Shohamy (2001, p.110) asserts that 'Tests should follow, not lead, a reform effort', it can be argued that insofar as tests can and do steer teaching and learning, that is tests form and control the content and method of classroom teaching, they can as well revolutionise the education system on both the macro- and micro-levels. This can be reached when tests are directed towards not measuring knowledge of students gained, but are made a teaching-learning tool which emancipates different stakeholders from focusing on tests and students from test anxiety. In this, White (2009) points out the importance and power of assessment as it 'is one of the most powerful factors influencing student learning, for better or worse' (p.5); therefore, assessment can be integrated into teaching and learning to create a learning environment where tests are directed towards initiating a learning atmosphere.

Education policy relating to assessment has the primary responsibility of teacher preparation reform relating to assessment. This is one important aspect in the way to reformulating the role of assessment and improving instruction. Hamp-Lyons (2007) argues that 'planned innovation in assessment is unlikely to be successful without vastly improved attention to teacher preparation in relation to assessment.' (p.487). Teachers need to be assessment literate and know how they can deal with requirements through which a learning culture can be encouraged over a testing culture. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the education secretariat to present and guarantee the appropriate preparation of teachers and developing and raising their awareness of forms of assessment that aid learning- assessment for learning. The education secretariat should sponsor workshops and conferences for language teachers and encourage providing modern theories of assessment that locate the learner in the centre of the leaning process and raise stakeholders' awareness of the role and importance of assessment for learning. This can provide teachers with different and modern techniques of assessment which pay due care to tests that do not only measure but also teach. This is what is known in literature as language assessment literacy (LAL). This should be the focus of other studies to see how assessment literate teachers are and what challenges they face in being assessment literate and in implementing change. Support for this argument comes from Hamp-Lyons (2007, p.493) who notes that:

> What teachers want is a learning culture, that is, a culture in which we can expect that the educational experience will be learner-centered, will encourage initiative and critical thinking, emphasize knowledge-creation rather than knowledge reproduction, value curriculum and

materials appropriate to local needs, and adopt forms of assessment that are congruent with educational objectives determined locally.

So what is needed is a learning culture of questioning and deep thinking, a culture that values learner initiative and critical thinking, where learners co-create knowledge with peers and teachers rather than students who regurgitate information in the tests (Black & William, 1998; Hamp-Lyons, 2007). In this, integration of tests and instruction becomes inevitable (Hamp-Lyons, 2007).

It is evident that testing in the Libyan education system is situated in objective testing paradigm influenced by the behaviourist learning theory. To make the situation clearer, instruction is also highly based on the old-fashioned behaviourist theory of learning evident in rote teaching and repetition where 'what is needed is to deliver appropriate stimuli, teach by repetition and then reward the appropriate responses. A test composed of many short, 'atomized', out-of-context questions, and 'teaching to the test' are both consistent with this approach.' (Black, 1999, p.120). This is mirrored in testing separate items at a time and separation of teaching and assessment. Therefore, one of the most important reforms that can be beneficial to the Libyan context is to support the social-constructivist model of learning, teaching and assessment (Shepard, 2000). To do this, Shepard (2000) suggests two ways. First, the form and content of assessment must change to represent thinking and problem solving skills. Second, the way assessment is perceived by teachers and students and how it is used in the classroom must be changed (Shepard, 2000). Another point that should be added here is also recommended by Shepard (2000) that 'assessment … should be moved into the middle of the teaching and learning process instead of being postponed as only the end-point of instruction.' (p.10). This is a prerequisite for assessment to be on-going and formative rather than summative. The change for the present context requires a shift from traditional instruction and testing to assessment based on and rooted in social-constructivist approach. For the Libyan context, Elmahjoub (2017) notes 'Formative assessment needs to be promoted in order to bring about reform to the teaching-to-the-test, exam-driven culture that is dominant in the education system in Libya.' (p.122). Moreover, as Shohamy (2001) contends, there is a need 'to develop critical strategies to examine the uses and consequences of tests, to monitor their power, minimise their detrimental force, reveal the misuses, and empower the test takers' as language tests are not neutral because they shape the lives of teachers and learners (p.131). Therefore, she (2001) calls for empowering tests-takers. Finally, what this paper attempted to do is to draw attention to the detrimental influence of tests on language education in the Libyan context, calling for revisiting, reformulating exams and *testing* in the education policy. However, without real awareness of the importance of

assessment for teaches and their knowledge of different modes, function and constructs of assessment, no real change is going to take place. This necessitates investigating teachers' knowledge and preparedness to implementing proper modes of assessment which is known as language assessment literacy.

Conclusion:

The paper discussed the situation of tests in the Libyan context and the influence tests have on the education system. The power of test can be detrimental as it affects instruction, the roles of teachers and students. The status quo of testing of the English language in the Libyan education system rests mainly on a traditional, out-dated paradigm of assessment. The function of tests is exclusively for measuring the sum of knowledge students gained during their academic year or semester. Teachers find themselves forced to focus on preparing their students for exams and students have a primary target which is passing the exams. The situation also demonstrates a high form of accountability where schools, teachers and head-teachers are judged successful or unsuccessful according to the students' grades, particularly in level-end exams, namely third years of preparatory and secondary schools. In this exam-dominated instruction, the paper recommends reforming the exam system by integrating assessment to learning through introducing formative modes of assessment and allowing teachers spaces to implement these forms of assessment. Without serious reforms to assessment mainly from the education policy, the exam system will still prevail and negatively shadow education on different levels.

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