

DOES STUDENTS' HIGHER SCORE IN THE NATIONAL EXAMINATION MEAN BEING SUCCESSFUL IN TEACHING?

Maya Puspitasari and Muhammad Arifin Pelawi

University of Glasgow, United Kingdom

mayapuspitasari09@gmail.com; m.pelawi.1@research.gla.ac.uk

Abstract: For final year students of secondary schools, every year the Indonesian government under the Ministry of Education holds an event called the national examination. This paper presents a research study to explore the washback effect of the national examination on the teachers in Indonesia. Washback means the influence of testing on the teaching and learning process. This study focuses on the teacher who is believed as the most influential person in guiding the students to pass the exam. Eight English teachers who taught final year students at eight junior secondary schools in Kabupaten Bandung were interviewed to find out their perception towards the national examination and its washback effects. The study showed that the pressure of having students to be successful in the national examination was not only from external pressure like the school principal, the parents and the students but also from the teachers' internal pressure as self-esteem.

Keywords: washback, teacher, national exam, high-stakes

INTRODUCTION

In the 1990s, there was a new policy applied to make English as an additional subject in the primary school. English was then included in the primary school timetable as a result of "the societal pressure demanding stronger foundation of English instruction at primary level in keeping with the demands of globalization" (Zein, 2016: 120). At that time, the demands of English teacher then were increasing. The primary schools may even recruit the university students in English major who had not graduated yet to fill in the shortage of the English teacher position.

Furthermore, under a program designed by the Indonesian government called a teacher certification program, there had been increasing number of people who choose teaching as their profession. This program granted double teachers' base salaries in order to improve the quality of the teaching (Suryahadi & Sambodho, 2013: 6). However, the 2005 Teacher Law number 14 required the teachers to have a baseline qualification of an S1 (undergraduate) degree while previously having D2 (Diploma degree) would have been sufficient to enable an individual to become a teacher. Its aim to have undergraduate degree was to "ensure that all teachers in the system had minimum levels of defined competencies" (Chang et al., 2014: 97). It was also intended to improve the teaching quality including "competency, academic qualification, certification, welfare, and status and rewards system for teachers" (Fahmi et al., 2011: 3). Based on this law, the teachers were required to have a minimum bachelor degree qualification and to pass a certification qualification. Those who were certified are alleged to receive professional allowance from the government. The allowance was doubled from their monthly salary. If a teacher worked in a remote area, he could earn additional allowance that could be as equal as their base salary (Evans et al., 2009).

Therefore, “the demand for admission to teacher training colleges continues to increase and was the highest ever in 2013” (World Bank, 2014: 6). Indonesia still had no well-defined instrument to effectively measure the performance of teachers. The government faced a challenge to certify a clear guideline in recruiting and selecting teachers. Since the government decided to have decentralization system, schools especially are easier to recruit teacher especially private teachers.

Law number 14 year 2005 on teachers and lecturers may attempt to professionalise the teaching profession to raise the quality of education by stipulating that all teachers in Indonesia should be certified within 10 years. This indeed motivated the teachers to obtain the certification; however, whether the certification had much impact on their performance was open to doubt. There was an indication that the certification failed to improve the students’ achievement.

World Bank & IPEA - Initiative for State Expenditure Analysis (2008: 16) stated that the Indonesian government was concerned with the fact that many allowance paid were “non-transparent, discretionary and prone to abuse” and the allowance seemed to have less influence on the personal or group performance. Since the decentralization policy applied, the school teachers tend to focus “more on administrative issues than on the improvement of the classroom performance of teachers” (Chang et al., 2014: 92). ADB – Asian Development Bank & OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2015: 307) indicated that “because teachers’ reputations, if not their pay, depended on how well their students perform in examinations, they may focus their efforts on the students who were most likely to succeed”. Harlen (2007) argued that high-stakes assessment can be intended as a “sole measure of the effectiveness of teachers, schools and the system as a whole”. Teaching therefore would inevitably focus on what will be tested in the national examination as a result of what was commonly termed ‘washback’.

The term ‘washback’ has been used by many literatures to define the influence of a test on teaching and learning process. Teachers’ anxiety, teaching materials and learning among the aspects have been studied as some examples that can be affected by high-stakes testing. Teachers might have pressure on helping the students to do well in the testing. As the consequence of new applied examination system, a teacher might focus his teaching contents to those covered by the testing. Spratt (2005) categorizes five areas that are affected by high-stakes testing. They are curriculum, materials, teaching method, feeling and attitude, and learning.

A good test may create a positive washback effect on the classroom activities. Teachers may have good spirit in teaching the students and the students might be encouraged to study in a very convenient atmosphere in the classroom. But what if it is not? The teachers may be stuck in examination preparation-cycle where they teach the students based on what needed in the national examination. The teachers; therefore, may emphasize more on certain aspects of a subject and put less attention to others depending on which aspects of the subject will be tested in the national examination. Inevitably, the students may also have no motivation in apprehending the subjects but more interested in beating the test. Instead of having it as part of learning process, the test become the learning objective. Therefore, the grade has no correlation with the level of students’ apprehension of the subject taught. The present study is set out to explore and identify a general research question: What is the priority of teachers in teaching final year students in the second semester before the national examination held?

METHOD

The research took place in one school district in Kabupaten Bandung, Indonesia in which fifteen junior secondary schools under the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture established. The key participants in this study were English teachers in Year 3 reflecting their roles as one of the stakeholders who helped the students preparing for the national examination. Even though interviewing was contemplated as non-naturalistic method to collect the data (Greener, 2011), it could be useful to gain the information from the sources directly. Punch (1998: 174-175) confirmed that interviewing was “a very good way of accessing people’s perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality”. In addition, a semi-structured interview was then set up in this study.

Goodson & Sikes (2008: 57) suggested that “given that teachers play the key role in interpreting, mediating and realizing what goes on in educational institutions, their values, motivations and understandings have considerable influence on professional practices of all kinds”. Teachers’ personal and educational background had tendency to offer the potential to study how the teachers’ profiles influence their perceptions on the national examination and its washback effect.

Eight English teachers from eight junior secondary schools participated in the semi-structured interviews which aimed at exploring the teachers’ background profile. While one school was a state school, seven other schools participated in the study represented various socio-economic status and facilities ranging between low-, medium-, to high-cost private schools (see table 1 below). The variety of schools is considerable important since high-stakes test as national examination might have different level of washback on some teachers compared with other teachers. Pseudonyms were used throughout the paper to conceal confidentiality.

Table 1: Profiles of participants

Name	School	Gender	Teaching experience
Putri	State	Female	22 years
Fera	High-cost private	Female	4 years
Nopi	Medium-cost private	Female	10 years
Endang	Medium-cost private	Male	8 years
Indri	Medium-cost private	Female	10 years
Husna	Low-cost private	Female	9 years
Susan	Low-cost private	Female	5 years
Mahmud	Low-cost private	Male	14 years

The goal to do the analysis was to collect certain themes related to the washback effect of the national examination on teaching, learning and parenting practices. Procedures for data analysis in this study consisted of transcribing the audio files, translating the transcript into English, coding the translation and identifying themes. For the purpose of analysis, three Cs: Coding, Categorizing, Concept proposed by Lichtman (2013) were adapted. As the interview was conducted in Indonesian, the first step to analyse the data was to translate the transcript into English. The translated transcripts (89 pages in total) were then coded using brief phrases. Once all the transcripts were coded, the next step was to organize the codes into categories. Certain codes were found to become major categories while others were grouped under a major

category. The final step in the analysis process was to identify concepts reflected from the data and the purpose of the data collection intended.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Teaching was one of highly desirable occupations in Indonesia (Chang et al., 2014; World Bank, 2014). When the participants in this study were asked why they chose teaching as a profession, most of them had similar responses; many of the existing teachers had family members who had been or were still teachers. In some cases, there were a number of people from the same extended family in the profession:

“my mother was also a teacher at Islamic school” (Endang);

“my father and my mother are also teachers as well” (Susan);

“my mother and my father were teachers” (Mahmud);

“I choose to become a teacher because my parents were also teachers” (Nopi).

“My great grandfather was a school principal, who used to be a teacher, then my grandfather was also a school principal and definitely he was a teacher as well. Then my uncle was also a teacher. They are my father’s relatives. From my mother’s, there are some relatives who became teachers and school principals as well”.

The reason why teaching was suggested as a profession mostly by the families who were or used to be teachers might come from the history of education system in Indonesia. In the 1970s and 1980s, the government at that time “built tens of thousands of new primary schools between 1975 and 1987 and rapidly hired and trained hundreds of thousands of new teachers” (Chang et al., 2014: 14).

The desire amongst young people to enter the teaching profession was a common theme raised by the teachers interviewed. Susan stated that “I’ve wanted to become a teacher ever since I was a kid.” A similar statement was also made by Indri and Husna. They mentioned that being a teacher was their dream occupation since they were young. This tendency to see teaching as a highly desirable occupation was consistent with the 2014 report from the World Bank (2014) that indicated that “almost $\frac{3}{4}$ of higher education graduates working in the public services sector in Indonesia are employed in the education sector, mostly as teachers” (p. 25). Chang et al. (2014: 99) added that there were increasing numbers of students enrolled in education in universities in Indonesia following The Teacher Law of 2005: “from 200,000 in 2005 to over 1 million in 2010”.

The respondents also pointed out that their family had stimulated them to choose teaching as their profession. Home environment surrounded by those who work in education field may influence young people in choosing the same occupation in the future. It was in line with the idea of Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005: 108) that the parental involvement in children’s education might be caused by “the parent’s personal experiences with schooling, prior experience with involvement, and on-going experiences with others related to the child’s schooling (e.g., teachers, other parents)”.

Lamb (2007: 759) emphasized that the awareness of Indonesian students about the importance of learning English was generated by the determination “with a future self whose competence in English provided access to academic and professional opportunities”. However, the implementation of teaching English shown in this study remained problematic. A number of teachers in this study believed that those future opportunities represented by grades not ‘real’ competences. Fera, who taught in a high-cost private school said:

“[in the second semester] we have a slogan called getting success in the national examination. ...in the second semester we only focus on the preparation for the national examination. ...we skip the speaking skill.”

Speaking is as important as other skills (listening, reading and writing) in both professional and academic fields; however, Fera preferred not to teach speaking as it is not tested in the English national examination. Fera’s response indicated that she and her school were more interested to gain higher score in the national examination than having better competencies in speaking skills.

All of the teachers who were interviewed also mentioned that they asked their students to focus on material that would be covered in the national examination. Most of them also discussed the past exam papers as they believed that the materials could help the student well-prepared for the examination. Their description had tendency that they created environment for students to learn how to beat the test. There was one teacher in this study (Husna) that still focused to teach students based on the textbook and said she had no special preparation for the national examination in the English class. However, she also admitted: “When I remember there is question that was in the last national examination, I always say to the children to study it more...I give the practical test”.

There is big pressure for the teachers to make all of their students must pass national examination. Nopi who was a teacher in a medium-cost private school said:

“...with all my hard work as a teacher and so later all of my students can graduate and make the school reputation would be good as well from the views of the parents, it means the teachers are also good in teaching them”.

The teacher’s views on how they perceived their success or failure was associated with the results of the national examination. It is also related to teachers’ professional accountability and school reputation. Therefore, the national examination might be believed as a major objective in teaching the final year students in the junior secondary school. Instead of having the students as an object of teaching, the teachers assumed that having good scores are the target of their teaching goal. The schools and the teachers might treat the national examination as a pressure that they needed to be encountered and prioritised in their practices. Also, the teachers believed that the scores gained in the national examination had significant effect on the school reputation, the teachers saw it as a part of their professional responsibility to make sure that their students had the best possible high scores in the national examination. This suggested that the school quality is defined by the students’ scores in the national examination. Fera admitted:

“Last year we also got the highest average score in this district. ...we got an award. So we reflected from that, the important thing is the result. We also keep communicating with the homeroom teachers to discuss which students who are still below the standard.”

Madaus & Russell (2010) notified when the scores in the high-stakes test were then compared among teachers and schools, relationships and trusts were in threats “leading some teachers to blame their colleagues at lower grade levels for poorly preparing students” (p.22). The teachers assumed that the scores in the national examination played an important role on their accountability. The scores were no longer determined as an indicator of students’ achievement. The political use of scores gained in the national examination amounted to an attempt to show a public impression that the teachers had performed their best on their practices. The teacher believed that the parents accepted the scores as a proper representative of school quality. Noticing the unintended consequences of national examination, the schools including teachers were under pressure to improve the results.

Feeling ashamed, guilt or frightened was also shown in the teachers’ view on the national examination:

“...I myself would feel ashamed if later there is even one single student that don’t graduate, I would be ashamed so as a teacher I failed though the school principal implicitly explicitly he did not expect all of the students here need to be a hundred per cent graduated, no, but I’m as a teacher if for example later there is a student who doesn’t graduate, it means I might be failed as a teacher” (Nopi);

“What I’m afraid of is they will be stressful because of the national examination. ...If the average score of this school is low, then automatically we would be ashamed” (Mahmud);

“I’m afraid having a student who didn’t graduate since it will affect the quantity of the students” (Indri);

“a little fright of having a child who won’t graduate... fright of having the low score...because all of them have to be graduated” (Husna);

“I’m worried if their score is not as what we’ve expected. ...whether this year the students can get higher score or not (Fera);

“I really worry...The national examination is still something frightening...What makes me worry is indeed the score” (Putri);

There is a big pressure for the teacher to make their entire students graduate. Even without external pressure, it is important for them to make their entire students graduate. It is represented their self-worth. They have pressure to prove themselves.

Gandana & Parr (2013: 230) claimed that “the moment by moment decisions that teachers make in their everyday classroom practice cannot be detached from ‘external’ factors, such as the teacher’s life experience and background”. Working as a teacher had tendency to be

shaped by their family background as six out of eight teachers in this study highlighted that their family who was working as a teacher motivated them to choose teaching as their career. Therefore, their perceptions towards the national examination were also intertwined with their family. Having the family who also worked in educational field had tendency that the teachers made the high score in the national examination as an important objective.

Putri motivated her students by providing prizes as she said:

“I told them if they get 10, I will give them reward, as last year there were two students who got 100...I told them, if there are 10 who got 100, it means 10 times as much as I promised”.

Putri’s response was interesting as teacher had lower salary compared to those working in information and communication, financial, real estate, business, public administration and health services (BPS – Statistics Indonesia, 2016). The pressure for gaining high scores in the national examination could not be high as Putri worked in a state school. Her salary, promotion and stability of job were not likely to be affected by students’ score. Putri’s initiative to spend her own money to reward the students who had perfect score in the English national examination was likely derived from the fact that she was from family that a number of its members were teachers. Although Putri showed less concern that her students could not do well in the national examination than what other teacher stated, her encouragement towards her students indicated that high score was related to successful teaching and it responded her own challenge having family members who were teachers. This situation was well described by Fuligni (2001: 62) as:

“Asian...teenagers are also more likely to believe that they should make sacrifices for the family and take into account the wishes of the family when making important decisions about their own lives. Finally, these youths tend to believe that such obligations to their families exist throughout their lives; they do not diminish as the youths themselves become adults”.

This interpretation provided an interesting insight taken from the results of this study that could link between the teachers’ profiles and how they perceived the national examination. This perception offered an element beyond classroom practices that could cause the level of anxiety of teachers towards the national examination was high. How the family background played a role in creating such anxiety was a contested area and there appeared to be little research to show the correlation between family background and motivation in the field of high-stakes testing. As a consequence, all teachers with family connection showed their feel of being embarrassed, frightened and guilty if they failed to make all of their students pass the exam. The result showed that teachers’ family background influenced how they perceived the power of the national examination.

CONCLUSIONS

In 1958, Michael Young, a British sociologist, published his seminal work, *The Rise of Meritocracy*, where he predicted that in the future meritocracy would become new social rank replaced aristocracy. Meritocracy occurred where the social rank was created by merit in schools and intelligence. His sad prediction is happening as the result of this study indicated that teachers in this study had perception that the grade in the national examination was a matter of positional social status. They believed that people were valued by the place where they gained education and what score they gained. This study suggested that education was used as a tool to create tittle for new kind of nobility. Scores in the national examination was worth more than the

knowledge that the students were supposed to gain in the schooling level. The pressure that the teachers had, was likely from their self-esteem especially in the context of Indonesia in negative way where they were more interested in gaining high scores than knowledge.

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