



The Impact of High-Stakes Examinations on Teaching Practices: A Case Study of Libyan Secondary School Teachers

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Abstract:

This study investigates the impact of the Secondary School Final Exam (SSFE) on English language teaching practices and the broader educational objectives of language learning in Libya. Focusing on the challenges teachers face in balancing exam preparation with fostering comprehensive language skills, the study explores the consequences of an exam-centric approach, which prioritizes grammar and vocabulary at the expense of other language competencies such as listening, speaking and writing. Through interviews and surveys with teachers of English, the study reveals that the SSFE's narrow focus has led to changes in teaching strategies, students' resistance to non-exam-related activities, and increased pressure on teachers. The findings highlight the need for a curriculum and exam structure that aligns more closely with communicative language teaching principles, ensuring a more holistic approach to language education. Practical recommendations are provided for policymakers and educators to promote balanced assessment and improve teaching practices.

Keywords: washback, Secondary School Final Exam, English language teaching, exam preparation, curriculum alignment, teaching practices, High-stakes exam.

المخلص:

يهتم هذا البحث بدراسة مدى تأثير الامتحانات النهائية للمرحلة الثانوية على ممارسات أساليب تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية والأهداف التعليمية الأخرى لتعلم اللغة في ليبيا. ويتركز البحث على دراسة التحديات التي يواجهها المعلمون في تحقيق التوازن المطلوب بين إعداد الطلاب للامتحان، وتطوير كل المهارات اللغوية الأخرى. تستكشف هذه الدراسة عواقب اتباع طرق التدريس التي تركز على إعداد الطلبة للامتحان، والتي تعطي الأولوية لتدريس القواعد والمفردات على حساب المهارات اللغوية الأخرى مثل الاستماع والمحادثة والكتابة. ومن خلال المقابلات واستطلاعات الرأي مع معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية، تكشف هذه الدراسة أن تركيز لامتحانات النهائية الشديد والمحصور على تقييم القواعد والمفردات فقط أدى إلى تغييرات في استراتيجيات التدريس التي ينتهجها المعلمون، وعدم رغبة الطلاب وامتناعهم عن الأنشطة الأخرى الغير مرتبطة بالامتحان، مما زاد عبئ التدريس على المعلمين. وتسلب النتائج الضوء على الحاجة إلى إعداد امتحانات تراعي التوازن المطلوب بينها وبين المنهج الدراسي وتستخدم طرق تدريس اللغة التفاعلية التواصلية، وهذا يضمن اتباع طرق تدريس أكثر شمولاً لتعليم اللغة. وتقدم الدراسة توصيات عملية لصناع القرار والمعلمين لتعزيز التقييم المتوازن وتحسين ممارسات التدريس.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الغسيل العكسي، الامتحان النهائي للمرحلة الثانوية، تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية، إعداد الامتحان، موازنة المناهج الدراسية، ممارسات التدريس، الامتحانات ذات المخاطر العالية.

Introduction

The concept of washback refers to the harmful and undesirable effects that high-stakes final exams have on teachers, students, and curricula. It encompasses any impact that state examinations may exert on the overall teaching and learning process within classroom settings, including language learners, classroom pedagogy, and

teachers' practices (Shohamy, 1996; Alderson and Wall, 1993). As Cohen (1994:41) explains, washback is evident when curriculum assessment tools usually influence the beliefs and the learning and teaching behaviours of both learners and teachers. High-stakes exams, which are used to determine students' success, failure, or eligibility to graduate or proceed to a higher educational level (Johnson et al., 2008), are often criticized for generating negative washback effects. Moreover, Dinh (2020, cited in Lan and Pham, 2024:131) states that teacher's' perceptions of high-stakes exams can be summarized as "how teachers feel, think about, believe, and understand test objectives, format, and classroom teaching practices".

Andrews (1994:45) describes the concept of washback as "ill-defined phenomenon" which influences the beliefs, behaviours, and motivation of both teachers, test-takers inside the classroom as well as the potential effect of parents. Buck (1988: 17) demonstrate that wash back is the impact or natural tendency for both test-takers and teachers "to tailor their classroom activities to the demands of the test, especially when the test is very important to the future of the students, and pass rates are used as a measure of teacher success". Other scholars further explain that negative washback occurs when teachers narrow their focus to only parts of the curriculum they believe will appear on the exam, omitting or ignoring other valuable content (Shohamy, 1993; Barnes, 2016).

Recent studies further highlight that high-stakes testing negatively affects teachers' perceptions of the teaching and learning process, often leading them to adopt the detrimental practice of a strategy called '*teach to the exam*' approach (Canli and Cakir, 2022; Baidoo-Anu and Ennu-Baidoo, 2022; Shah-Toti, Khan, and Ali, 2022; Thu, 2020:). This shift in focus from broader syllabus goals to exam-specific preparation undermines the quality of education, resulting in poor learning outcomes and diminished educational attainment.

This study aims to investigate how the focus on preparing students for the Secondary School Final Examinations (SSFEs) impacts the teaching practices and perceptions of Libyan secondary school English teachers. To achieve this aim, this study is guided with the following research questions:

1. To what extent is there a misalignment between the syllabus objectives and the requirements of the final exam?
2. What are teachers' perceptions and beliefs regarding the SSFE (Secondary School Final Examination)?
3. How does the design of the final exam questions influence teachers' performance and instructional methods?
4. What factors influence teachers' classroom practices in preparation for the SSFE?

Literature Review:

Mirza et al. (2023) examined the correlation between course objectives and the effects of high-stakes baccalaureate examinations (BAC) on the teaching and learning process in Algeria. Their study highlighted a significant misalignment between the curriculum objectives and the requirements of the BAC exams. Specifically, they investigated how the BAC exams influenced teachers' perspectives on their teaching methods and the improper implementation of the communicative language approach. Data for the study were collected through an online questionnaire distributed to 85 high school English teachers. The findings revealed that, despite the curriculum being competency-based and emphasizing the integration of the four language skills, the BAC exam prerequisites failed to align with these objectives. This misalignment compelled teachers to rely on traditional methods, such as the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), to prepare students for the exam. Consequently, the focus shifted away from fostering communicative competence toward exam-oriented teaching practices, undermining the curriculum's intended goals.

Onaiba (2013) investigated the impact of third-year final preparatory examinations on Libyan English teachers. The study focused on three key variables: teachers' perceptions of the exams, their teaching methods and testing techniques, and their emphasis on specific topics. Data were collected through interviews, classroom observations, and questionnaires administered to Libyan secondary school English teachers in Misrata. The findings revealed that teachers generally held negative attitudes toward the state final examinations. The majority of respondents viewed these exams as invalid, highlighting that the design of the questions failed to accurately assess students' competence and performance. Furthermore, the exams placed additional pressure and demands on teachers. The study also uncovered that many teachers concentrated disproportionately on certain parts of the curriculum while neglecting others, particularly materials they believed would not appear on the exam. For example, skills such as writing were often entirely ignored because they were excluded from the final examination format. This exam-driven approach forced teachers to focus on content likely to appear in the test, leading to an unbalanced teaching approach. Additionally, most teachers reported that these exams lacked reliability and were ineffective tools for evaluating students' overall proficiency. The findings underscored the disconnect between the exam format and the broader educational goals of developing students' comprehensive language skills.

Adnan and Mahmood (2014) conducted a study using a questionnaire to investigate the negative impact of Pakistani Secondary School Certificate (PSSC) examinations on English teachers' instructional methods, as well as their perceptions and beliefs about the validity of these exams. The study involved a random sample of fifty English teachers at the secondary school level in Sargodha. The findings revealed that most teachers believed the selection of teaching materials was heavily influenced by the PSSC exams. Teachers reported that they

primarily focused on teaching materials likely to appear in the exam, emphasizing that their primary objective was to ensure students passed the final examination. The study also highlighted that teaching methods were significantly shaped by the exam-driven approach. Specifically, teachers adopted specialized techniques to explain topics and prepare students with strategies necessary to succeed in the national exam. These techniques were notably different from the methods they used when exams were not a factor. The results underscored the extent to which PSSC exams dictated both the content and approach of English teaching, often at the expense of broader educational goals.

Similar findings were reported in a study conducted by Hayes and Read (2004). These results revealed that the selection of teaching materials was not aimed at helping students develop language proficiency but was instead driven by the need to familiarize students with the types and styles of questions likely to appear on the national final exams. Specifically, teachers focused on equipping students with test-taking strategies rather than fostering comprehensive language learning. The studies highlighted that aligning curriculum delivery with both the requirements of high-stakes exams and students' learning needs posed significant challenges for teachers. This difficulty stemmed from the fact that each learning task often demanded unique materials, content, and exam patterns, making it nearly impossible to address both effectively. Similar conclusions were drawn in earlier research by Cheng (2004) further supporting the notion that exam-focused teaching compromises the broader goals of language education.

In her study on the potential impact of the internationally recognized First Certificate in English (FCE) exam on classroom practices, Tsagari (2011) interviewed both highly qualified and experienced native and non-native English teachers involved in preparing students for the FCE. The findings revealed a strong correlation between the exam content and the teaching methods employed in classrooms. Teachers acknowledged that their teaching practices were significantly influenced—and, to some extent, constrained—by their reliance on preparatory materials designed specifically for the exam. This reliance led teachers to adjust their methodologies to align with the exam's requirements, prioritizing test preparation over broader language development. Additionally, two underlying factors were identified as contributing to this trend. Firstly, the nature and design of commercially published exam preparation materials often dictated specific teaching approaches, limiting pedagogical flexibility. Secondly, teachers reported experiencing considerable pressure, as their professional value was largely judged by their students' performance and success in the exam. This added strain further reinforced the focus on exam-oriented teaching, potentially detracting from more holistic language instruction. However, the results from Gao and Karanasiou (2024) are slightly different. They claimed that novice teachers' practices tend to be less affected by the high-stakes exam compared to long-experienced teachers who are more test-oriented.

In conclusion, the studies reviewed underscore the significant influence of high-stakes examinations on English language teaching practices across different contexts. From Algeria to Libya, Pakistan, and internationally, a recurring theme emerges: the misalignment between curriculum objectives and the demands of these exams leads to a narrowing of instructional focus. Teachers, constrained by exam requirements, often prioritize test-taking strategies and content likely to appear in the exams, which in turn undermines the development of students' comprehensive language skills. This exam-driven approach not only limits the scope of teaching but also exerts pressure on teachers, whose professional success is increasingly measured by student performance in these exams. The findings highlight a critical need for a reevaluation of exam formats and educational practices to ensure that they support broader language learning goals, rather than solely preparing students to pass high-stakes tests.

Method

Research Design

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, incorporating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data were collected through classroom observations, open-ended face-to-face interviews, and a questionnaire.

Participants

The study involved six teachers of English, all with over ten years of experience teaching third-year secondary school students. Non-probability convenience sampling was used to select participants from four secondary schools in Alkhoms. The sample consisted of three male and three female teachers, all of whom graduated from the Department of English. One participant (Teacher 4) had attended a teaching training program facilitated by British Council trainers.

Classroom Observation

Each teacher was observed for approximately 35 minutes to gather data on their teaching practices. Observations focused on relevant aspects of classroom instruction, with detailed notes taken during the sessions. Prior to the observations, teachers were informed about the time of the observation and made aware of their ethical

rights, though the specific aims of the study were not disclosed. A potential limitation of this method is the "observer paradox," where the presence of the researcher may influence teachers' behaviours, leading them to alter their teaching to appear more competent. To minimize this effect, teachers were reassured that they would not be evaluated and that their responses would remain anonymous. They were also encouraged to adhere to their normal teaching practices during the observation.

Interviews

Both structured and semi-structured interviews are effective tools for exploring teachers' perceptions and beliefs (Creswell, 2003). In this study, five standardized semi-structured interviews were conducted. This format allowed for follow-up questions based on responses, enabling the researcher to gather comprehensive data. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for accuracy.

Questionnaires

A questionnaire comprising 25 items was administered to the six participating teachers. The questionnaire was designed to capture both demographic information and teachers' beliefs regarding the SSFEs, the curriculum, and their teaching practices. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure the teachers' responses. The questionnaires were collected after an hour.

Results And Discussion

The results are presented in a structured format, organized by research questions and hypotheses, to ensure clarity and ease of interpretation. Data obtained from the questionnaire are illustrated using graphs and charts for better visualization. For the interview analysis, relevant excerpts from the transcripts are included verbatim to provide a clear representation of the participants' perspectives. The transcripts were carefully reviewed and analyzed to ensure an in-depth understanding of the findings.

Findings from the observation and interview

Teachers' Perceptions of the Misalignment Between Syllabus and Exam Content

All teacher participants unanimously reported a significant mismatch between the school syllabus, which adopts a student-centered approach, and the content of the final exams. They highlighted that while the course is designed to balance the development of the four key language skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—the SSFEs predominantly focus on grammar and vocabulary, leaving the other language skills largely unassessed. This misalignment is particularly problematic for both teaching practices and student learning outcomes. For instance, the exams do not provide an adequate platform for assessing students' proficiency in writing, listening, or speaking, thus undermining the holistic educational objectives of the syllabus. Teacher 3 and Teacher 4 further pointed out that the low level of English proficiency among students makes it difficult to effectively apply communicative language teaching (CLT) methods. This, in turn, exacerbates the challenge of bridging the gap between curriculum objectives and exam requirements.

Teachers' Perceptions of the Exam and Its Impact on Teaching

A detailed analysis of the findings reveals that the exam requirements create substantial pressure on both teachers and students. All participants emphasized the continuous strain caused by the exam policy, noting that they are tasked with teaching the prescribed curriculum while simultaneously preparing students for the high-stakes exam. Teachers are required to deliver course content within strict time limits while also ensuring that students are well-equipped to perform well in the exam. This dual responsibility leads teachers to prioritize exam-focused materials, tailoring their instruction to familiar test formats to maximize students' chances of success. This pressure is compounded by the students' demand for mock SSF tests, which further intensifies the focus on exam preparation rather than broader language acquisition. Teacher 4 specifically criticized the design of the exam questions, arguing that many items encourage rote memorization rather than the development of true understanding. According to Teacher 4, this undermines the educational process, as students are incentivized to memorize answers without genuinely grasping the language concepts.

Influence of Teachers' Perceptions on Teaching Methods

The findings clearly indicate that teachers' perceptions of the exam and the need to meet students' expectations significantly shape their teaching practices. Half of the participants noted that the success of a teaching method is largely gauged by the students' performance on the SSFEs, and their satisfaction with the scores they achieve. Teachers 1 and 4 explained that while the SSFE itself does not directly dictate their teaching approach, the misalignment between the students' proficiency levels and the high expectations of the curriculum plays a critical role. They pointed out that it is almost impossible to implement CLT effectively when teaching upper-intermediate material to students with beginner-level English skills. This disparity forces teachers to modify their teaching strategies, often relying on more traditional, exam-oriented methods. Another factor that significantly influences

teaching practices is the pressure from school administration. Teacher 2 highlighted that the administration places emphasis not on the teachers' adherence to the course objectives but on students' performance in the exam, as well as the speed at which the curriculum is completed. This administrative focus on exam results, rather than the quality of instruction, adds an additional layer of pressure on teachers. As a result, time constraints and the need to address students' low performance led to the exclusion of some language skills from the curriculum, particularly listening and speaking and writing. Teachers reported that these skills are often neglected due to the focus on grammar and vocabulary, as well as the need to complete the syllabus within a limited timeframe.

Teachers' Adaptations in Classroom Teaching in Response to the SSFEs

In line with previous findings, the classroom teaching and activities of several teachers were found to be influenced by the SSFEs, as they adapted their lesson plans and teaching strategies to better prepare students for the exam. This adaptation was particularly evident in how teachers structured their lessons to emphasize exam-relevant content such as grammar and vocabulary, often at the expense of more communicative practices and the development of productive skills such as speaking and writing. Consider the following observation:

For instance, Teachers 3's, 4's and 6's reading lessons were significantly shaped by the exam's focus on specific parts of the course content, prompting the teacher to direct students' attention to certain lesson sections that were deemed likely to appear in the SSFEs. This focus was evident in the teacher's use of both course and activity books, where students were asked to underline key areas. Despite some efforts to integrate a communicative approach during the lesson, particularly in checking understanding and promoting vocabulary acquisition, the reading activities were limited to workbook exercises without any real-world application of reading skills.

Similarly, Teacher 1's speaking and writing lessons were constrained by the exam's lack of assessment of speaking, leading the teacher to prioritize grammar over practical speaking activities. The writing lesson, while incorporating some interactive elements where students were encouraged to deduce the correct writing structure, ultimately revolved around students copying the teacher's writing, with little opportunity for authentic writing practice. This emphasis on grammar, tenses, and exam-like exercises reflected a broader pattern where the perceived lack of importance of speaking and writing in the SSFEs led to their marginalization in favor of test-related content.

Teacher 5, on the other hand, combined both the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) and communicative approaches in his reading lesson. However, even with this more balanced approach, the lesson remained focused on vocabulary and definitions likely to appear in the SSFEs, with minimal opportunities for students to practice reading skills outside of workbook exercises.

Teacher 2's speaking lesson, however, provided students with little opportunities for self-expression, using a communicative approach to foster interaction. Despite this, the teacher still relied on GTM techniques to ensure full understanding of the content, which was then assessed through questions from the book. Interestingly, while speaking was not tested in the SSFEs, Teacher 2 made a notable effort to teach speaking, although students expressed resistance to speaking activities, citing their irrelevance to the exam's focus.

Overall, the findings suggest that the SSFEs have a significant impact on how teachers approach classroom activities, leading them to focus on exam-related content (primarily grammar and vocabulary) and limit the teaching of speaking, reading, and writing skills to exercises directly aligned with the test. This pattern underscores the influence of high-stakes exams on teaching methods, with teachers prioritizing test preparation at the expense of a more holistic approach to language learning. Moreover all the teachers above do not comply to a certain method, narrowing the contents to the teaching of grammatical rules and vocabulary. Also, the six teachers confirmed that listening is completely neglected.

Analysis of the interviews

Perceptions of the SSFEs and Their Limitations

The teachers expressed varying opinions on the SSFEs' effectiveness and its alignment with the curriculum. Teachers 1, and 2 shared concerns about the SSFE focusing primarily on grammar and vocabulary, neglecting critical skills such as writing and speaking. Teacher 1 explained, "*The SSFE don't include writing at all, and this is a huge gap.*" Teacher 5 echoed similar concerns, stating, "*The lack of speaking skills assessment means that students simply don't care about speaking.*" Likewise, Teachers 3 and 4 believed that the SSFE' questions were inadequate and unfair, focusing on grammar. Teacher 4 remarked, "*I cannot waste time on teaching writing a narrative paragraph or describing a picture, simply because students are not going to be tested in these language areas*"

The Impact of the SSFEs on Teaching Practices and Student Motivation

All teachers acknowledged the influence of SSFEs on their teaching, particularly regarding the focus on grammar and vocabulary over other skills. Teachers 1, 2, 3 and 5 believed that the absence of speaking and writing in the exams negatively impacted their ability to teach those skills effectively, causing disengagement among students. Teacher 1 emphasized, "*Since writing isn't tested, I can't devote as much time to teaching it, and the students*

know it's not important for the exam." Similarly, Teacher 5 shared, "Students don't care about speaking, because it's not part of the exam, so they just focus on grammar." On the other hand, Teachers 5 felt less constrained by the SSFE and continued to teach some writing activities, limiting their focus on grammar and vocabulary. Teacher 5 elucidated that the SSFEs controlled what he teaches, but not the way he teaches.

Use of Communicative Approaches in the Classroom

All teachers stated that they incorporate communicative approaches in their lessons, though time constraints and the pressure to complete the curriculum sometimes hindered this approach. Students generally responded negatively to these activities, citing their irrelevance to the SSFE as a key reason for their reluctance. Teacher 2 observed, "The students often see communicative activities as a waste of time because they don't help with the SSFEs" Teacher 4 added, "I try to make communicative activities relevant to the exam, but students still aren't motivated to participate." Despite these challenges, 33 % of the teachers continued to slightly implement communicative methods, although they acknowledged that students' motivation was often low.

Strategies for Preparing Students for the SSFE

Teachers reported starting SSFE preparation early in the academic year, integrating exam preparation into their regular teaching. Common methods included using past exam papers, highlighting key areas, and designing mock tests. Teacher 3 mentioned, "We focus on past papers to familiarize students with the format and content." Teachers 2, 4, and 5 also created custom test items to help students practice. Teacher 2 explained, "I design my own tests that simulate the SSFEs to give students more opportunities to practice." Despite this emphasis on preparation, there was consensus that exam preparation should not dominate the curriculum. Teacher 5 remarked, "We must balance exam preparation with broader language learning. The exams shouldn't be the only focus."

Reflections on the Reliability and Impact of the SSFEs

Teachers 1, 2, and 5 expressed concerns that the SSFEs did not fully measure students' language proficiency, particularly in terms of productive skills like speaking and writing. Teacher 1 argued, "The exams focus too much on grammar and ignore speaking, listening and writing, which are essential skills." Likewise, Teacher 4 elaborated

"Although most of SSFE are based on the reading texts from the coursebook, they are invalid. They just test general information encouraging memorization. For example, they ask (When was X born?) Without the existence of a reading text in the exam paper). I think inspectors and examiners have to change this type of examination to a new exam which assess all the language competencies".

Teacher 5 also criticized the SSFEs, stating, "The SSFEs don't give a full picture of students' abilities because they ignore listening, speaking and writing as well." Teachers 3, however, disagreed, believing the SSFEs were valid and reliable in assessing students' language proficiency in a way that reflected the curriculum. They stated, "I think the SSFEs assess students well, especially their grammar, which is key to the curriculum." Despite these differing views, all teachers agreed that the SSFEs negatively impacted students' learning habits. Teacher 2 summed up, "The focus on grammar makes students rely too much on memorization instead of understanding the language."

As can be inferred from the extracts above, All the teachers ensure the invalidity and reliability of the exam-based questions. They confirmed that this type of questions was the main reason which badly affect how and what they teach.

Findings from the questionnaires

After collecting and analysing the responses from the teachers' questionnaire, the results were converted into numerical data for clearer interpretation.

A significant 83% of teachers reported that they tailor their instruction to focus on items that resemble the format of the SSFEs. They also advised their students to utilize guidebooks specifically designed for practicing the types of questions expected on the SSFEs, as indicated by their responses to Items (4, 29). In addition to this, while teachers are aligning their teaching to the exam format, they are also more likely to rely on dedicated test preparation materials.

All teachers (100%) agreed that their choice of teaching methods is somehow influenced by the needs of their students. Furthermore, 67% of teachers acknowledged that the SSFEs have limited their teaching approaches, preventing them from delivering instruction in the way they believe is most effective, as shown by their responses to **Items 6,13**. Despite these limitations, 100% of the teachers indicated that they adjust their teaching to meet the specific requirements of the SSFEs (Items, 9,10,7). This shows a strong consensus among teachers about the pressure to align their teaching methods with the exam's expectations.

However, these needs are framed primarily around the students' ability to perform well in the SSFEs, as confirmed by the responses to Item (19). This indicates that teachers' decisions regarding their pedagogical approach are driven by exam preparation rather than broader educational goals.

As for the Psychological Impact on teachers, their responses to Items (20, 24, 26) indicated that the psychological impact of the SSFEs is significantly affect teachers. Approximately 83 % of teachers admitted to feeling anxious and stressed due to the pressure of preparing their students for the SSFEs. Additionally, they feel concerned about their students' success in the exam. Only 17 % of teachers did not report such feelings, emphasizing the widespread emotional toll the exam preparation process takes on educators.

The validity of the SSFEs was also a concern for many teachers. All the six teachers expressed doubt about the exam's ability to accurately assess students' language proficiency, as shown by their response to Items (17, 18). These teachers argued that the SSFEs fail to test the full scope of language skills as intended. This was further supported by Item 1, where 100% of teachers stated that the objectives of their curriculum diverge significantly from the content tested on the SSFEs.

In terms of teaching approaches, 83% of teachers strongly preferred traditional methods, particularly Grammar Translation Method (GTM), because they considered it time-efficient and effective for exam preparation (Items 8, 6, 13). This preference for traditional methods may reflect the pressure to ensure students' success in the SSFEs rather than fostering communicative language skills (Item 19,20). Despite the exam's limited assessment of writing, 33 % of teachers claimed that they slightly teach writing (but not speaking) alongside grammar and vocabulary. This indicates that teachers do not completely neglect writing but try to integrate this skill into their lessons (Item 27). Additionally, Although 100 % of teachers do not view these productive skills as a waste of time, as highlighted by Items (27, 28), 83% of the teachers claimed that teaching these skills is highly inadvisable within this restricted time and under the pressure of SSFEs (Item 12).

Furthermore, 83% of teachers indicated that, in the absence of the SSFEs, they would dedicate more time to teaching listening, speaking and skills (Item 11). Despite the challenges posed by the SSFEs, 100% of teachers affirmed their commitment to ensuring that students understand the course materials, as reflected in Item 5. This demonstrates that, even in the face of external pressures, teachers remain dedicated to their students' learning and comprehension.

Discussion

The findings of this study highlight several significant issues regarding the alignment of the syllabus, the final exams, and their impact on teaching practices in an English language classroom. The teachers' perceptions of the misalignment between the syllabus and exam content reveal a deep concern for the overall educational objectives. As noted, the syllabus adopts a student-centred approach that aims to develop a balance across all four key language skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—while the SSFEs focus predominantly on grammar and vocabulary, neglecting the assessment of the three language skills listening, writing and speaking. This mismatch limits the effectiveness of the curriculum, as teachers are unable to fully assess and develop students' language proficiency in a comprehensive manner (Harmer, 2015). The lack of assessment in areas like listening, speaking and writing, as expressed by Teacher 1 and Teacher 5, not only impacts students' learning motivation but also undermines the communicative goals of the syllabus.

The influence of high-stakes exams on teaching practices has been a subject of concern in several studies (e.g., Wang, 2014), and the current study aligns with this literature. The teachers reported feeling substantial pressure to prioritize exam-oriented content, particularly grammar and vocabulary, which directly affects their teaching strategies. As highlighted in the interviews, the need to prepare students for the SSFEs often leads teachers to limit their instructional time for other language skills (e.g., speaking and writing). Teacher 4's statement about the exam questions favouring rote memorization supports the claim that such exams may fail to foster genuine understanding of the language, instead reinforcing surface-level learning that does not reflect real-world language use (Ozverir & Herrington, 2015). This approach is detrimental to the holistic educational objectives outlined in the syllabus.

The findings also reveal how teachers' perceptions of the SSFEs influence their pedagogical approaches, with most teachers emphasizing the exam's influence on their teaching decisions. For instance, Teacher one's and Teacher four's observations that the exam forces them to focus primarily on grammar at the expense of communicative language teaching (CLT) reflect the struggle between the prescribed syllabus and the realities of high-stakes testing. According to Richard and Rodgers (2014), CLT emphasizes communication as the primary goal of language teaching; however, when exams are designed to assess grammar and vocabulary, teachers are pressured to shift from communicative to more traditional, test-focused methodologies. The discrepancy between the curriculum's objectives and exam content creates a tension that teachers must navigate, often leading to an overemphasis on grammar instruction at the expense of productive language skills.

Moreover, the psychological impact on teachers is notable, as shown by the high level of stress and anxiety reported by 80% of the respondents. Teachers not only face the challenge of aligning their teaching to the demands of the SSFEs but are also burdened by the emotional toll of preparing students for high-stakes assessments. This pressure is exacerbated by the perception that the exams fail to accurately measure students'

language proficiency (Cheng, 2004). The findings from the questionnaire reveal that, despite the negative emotional consequences, teachers remain committed to ensuring that students grasp the material and achieve a passing grade, demonstrating a deep sense of responsibility for their students' success. However, as Teacher 2 noted, the students' resistance to engaging in speaking activities, which are not assessed in the exam, highlights a broader issue of motivation. This dynamic is problematic, as students are likely to prioritize the skills that are most relevant to the exam, often ignoring other important aspects of language learning.

The study also examined the adaptations teachers made in response to the SSFEs. As indicated in the interview and questionnaire responses, teachers adjusted their teaching strategies to better align with the exam content. For instance, Teacher 4 emphasized exam-relevant content in reading lessons, focusing on grammar and vocabulary, while Teacher 1 adjusted the speaking and writing lessons to reflect the exam's lack of emphasis on these skills. This response to exam pressure mirrors similar findings from other studies, which argue that the focus on exam preparation can significantly alter teaching practices and **materials** (Alderson & Wall, 1993). The reduced emphasis on speaking and writing skills (and the complete negligence of listening) is particularly concerning, as it deprives students of the opportunity to develop these essential communicative competencies.

The findings from this study underscore the profound impact that high-stakes exams have on both teaching practices. The misalignment between the syllabus and the SSFEs, coupled with the psychological pressure placed on teachers, leads to a narrowing of the curriculum and a shift in focus towards exam preparation. This pattern of teaching undermines the broader educational goals of fostering a comprehensive language skill set and may contribute to a cycle of disengagement among students. The results suggest that reforms in assessment design, aimed at better aligning the exam content with the holistic goals of language education, are necessary to mitigate these challenges and promote more effective and engaging teaching practices.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the significant influence of the Secondary School Final Exam (SSFEs) on both teaching practices and the broader language learning objectives in English education. The perceived misalignment between the syllabus and the exam content, particularly the focus on grammar and vocabulary at the expense of other language skills such as speaking and writing, has led to a narrowing of the curriculum. Teachers reported adapting their teaching methods to focus primarily on exam-relevant content, often at the cost of more communicative, student-centred approaches. The study also revealed that this focus on exam preparation not only affects the instructional practices but also impacts teachers' emotional well-being, as they feel pressured to meet exam-related expectations. Additionally, students expressed resistance to activities perceived as irrelevant to exam success, further exacerbating the disconnect between language learning and exam requirements.

The findings underscore the need for a more holistic approach to language assessment that aligns more closely with the educational goals outlined in the curriculum. By integrating a broader range of language skills, including speaking and writing, into the SSFEs, a more balanced and comprehensive approach to language learning could be fostered. This would allow teachers to implement communicative language teaching methods effectively and encourage students to develop proficiency in all four key language skills.

Based on the findings, several practical recommendations can be made for educational policymakers and practitioners. First, it is essential to review and revise the SSFEs structure to ensure that it adequately assesses all language skills, including speaking and writing. This would not only make the exam more reflective of the curriculum but also reduce the pressure on teachers to focus solely on grammar and vocabulary. Second, professional development programs for teachers should focus on balancing exam preparation with the need to foster a communicative and skills-based approach to language teaching. Teachers should be encouraged to integrate speaking and writing activities into their lessons, even if these skills are not directly tested in the exams. Lastly, there should be an emphasis on developing teaching materials that support a well-rounded approach to language learning, allowing teachers to better prepare students for the full range of linguistic tasks they may encounter in real-world contexts.

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Appendix A
Teacher's Questionnaire

ITEM	STATEMENTS	SA	A	N	D	SD
1	The course objectives and the assessment criteria are not aligned.					
2	Teaching listening and speaking is completely neglected as they will not appear in the SSFEs (secondary School Final exams).					
3	More emphasis is placed on teaching grammar and vocabulary because they are the content of the exam.					
4	I always consult past exam papers to train my students with the tactics and format of the final examinations.					
5	I insist that my students comprehend the important topics.					
6	Student-centred approach is not a good strategy to familiarize my students with SSFEs.					
7	I alter or adjust my teaching style to meet the requirements of the SSFEs , so adapting a good teaching method is restricted.					
8	GMT is always used to prepare my students for the test because it saves time.					
9	My teaching style is not affected by the SSFEs.					
10	I rarely adjust my teaching style to suit the contents of SSFEs.					
11	I will put equal attention to the language competences and implement CLT approach if there were no SSF exams.					
12	The allocated time is not enough to teach the four language skills which are not tested in the SSFEs.					
13	The implementation of student-centred approach is restricted since the allocated time is not enough to finish the whole curriculum.					
14	My students always inquire about the way how the exam questions are designed.					
15	I design invalid questions simply because they are likely to appear in the SSC exam.					
16	A lot of time is devoted to the exam preparation tasks rather than teaching the syllabus.					
17	SSFEs are invalid because they fail to test what it aims to test.					
18	SSFEs generally measure students' memorization rather than competence.					
19	Learners' success in the SSFE is my ultimate goal.					
20	I feel that I am responsible for student's failure in the exam.					
21	I think that the language testing procedure in Libya is good and valid.					
22	I encourage my students to memorizes some dates and names, which considered irrelevant to learning English.					
23	I encourage my students to engage in a non-exam-related activity each class.					
24	The school administration instructs me to train students for the test.					
25	My success is always linked to the students' success in the test.					
26	I feel under pressure because of the time constrains for the exam preparation					
27	Teaching writing is essential in the class.					
28	Teaching speaking is essential in the class					
29	I always advice my students to use guidebooks for the exam preparation.					