



Bahrain's Secondary EFL Teachers' Beliefs of English Language National Examination: 'How it made teaching different?'

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Due to the spread of applying standardized national examinations in addition to the normal centralized formal exams in English language teaching, EFL teachers have been urged to reshape their teaching pedagogies to respond to the demands and competencies which EFL students are required to fulfil in these exams. This study sheds light on this phenomenon by investigating the influence of applying the standardized English national exam policy in a non-native English-speaking context on the teaching practices and beliefs of EFL teachers in secondary schools. A mixed research method was employed to identify the aspects of the teaching learning process of English as an EFL that were affected by the application of the standardized testing as well as exploring the teachers' beliefs of these effects on their teaching as EFL teachers in a none-native speaking context. The quantitative data was gathered using questionnaires and the results revealed a high effect of the application of the standardized national English exam on students' learning and welfare with a mean of (4.164) but with an average effect on the aspects of language competence and implementation of innovative teaching pedagogies.

Keywords: EFL standardized exam, EFL national exam, language testing, teachers' knowledge, teachers' cognition

INTRODUCTION

By the beginning of the new millennium and the rise of globalization as a destiny phenomenon for local societies, a new policy has been implemented towards measuring the outcomes resulted from the teaching learning process. This policy is presented in applying unified standards and criteria to measure students' achievement performance in education and it has spread out in different parts of the world. As a consequence, the new situation required a wide application of international exams to measure the students' fulfillment of those unified criteria and standards. For instance, a wide application of the THIMMS test in science and math was done by several countries as well as using IELTS and TOEFL in English language as a standardized indicator of language proficiency for learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) or second

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language (ESL). Nevertheless, an alignment to the international levels was also sought by several countries in this regard to improve the local practices of teaching and provide a standardized measurement of their students' performance of their achievement in their learning. For instance, in Europe, Australia, Singapore, and North America, unified national frameworks were designed according to the international standards to align the occurred practices and performances of students to the international standards in this regard as the aim at this stage has become to unify the educational policies and practices on both local level and international levels. The purpose behind this action was to respond to the needs and changes resulted by globalization and its consequences on the educational process.

The Gulf region, as similar to other parts of the world, had also to respond to this new trend. In the United Arab Emirates, Abu Dhabi Education Council was founded in 2005; in Qatar the Education Supreme Council was established in 2002, and in Bahrain, the Supreme Council for Education and Training was founded in 2005. The main aim of these councils was to standardize the educational policies and practices and align them to the international standards through launching specific initiatives to enable students in these countries to achieve high performance levels according to the international scale in the core subjects, which English is considered one of them. Consequently, in the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Bahrain Quality Assurance (BQA) was established by the royal decree no. (32) in 2008 to improve the quality of educational practices in the Bahraini education context through setting standards and guidelines to measure the quality of the performance of education and training institutions in the Kingdom of Bahrain (BQA website, 2018). In 2012, the Directorate of National Examinations (DNE) was established as one of the directorates of the National Authority for Qualifications and Quality Assurance of Education and Training (QQA), according to the Royal Decree No. (83). The DNE was mandated to prepare and conduct national examinations to independently assess the Kingdom of Bahrain students' performance in Grades 3, 6, and 9 in the core subjects: Arabic, English, Mathematics and Science, and for Grade 12: Arabic, English and Problem-Solving (BQA website, 2018). This policy of applying standardized national exams implies that students' results in national exams, mainly English, can be considered as an indicator of the teaching and learning practices quality these students have been experiencing during their formal education in each stage.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to McDonnell (2004), EFL/ESL students' performance in standard exams reflects their teachers' professional values, their desire to do well by their students, and their endeavor to be competent professionals. Dodge (2007) concurs this through his study which he conducted on investigating the impact of standardized testing emphasis on teaching and learning in kindergarten through 12th grade in United States' schools from the perspectives of East Tennessee Principals. Dodge (2007) explains that the obtained findings reveal that principals generally have a positive view of standardized testing; in the way they can use test data in many ways to improve the teaching and learning in their schools. Similarly, Zhao (2016) states that in China and some other

Asian countries, the increase in using standardized English tests to assess young learners has motivated parents to have their children receive early English education and learn it as their second-language (L2).

However, other studies report negative effects of using standardized tests on teaching and learning processes in ESL/EFL context. For instance, Menken (2006) investigated how high-stakes tests could become the main leader of the teaching and learning practices of schools and individual educators. Using multiple tools (e.g. interviews, observations, official documents, standardized test scores and graduation), the researcher conducted her study on a purposeful sample (n=128) distributed between 61 students, 19 administrators (school principals & assistant principals) and 4 ESL/EFL guidance counselors. The samples were distributed among 10 high schools in New York City in which English is taught as ESL or EFL. The general reached finding indicates that due to the high focus on using standardized tests, many teachers had instead increased native language instruction as a test preparation strategy for their ESL/EFL students. In addition, those teachers focused more on the areas in the curriculum which more serve the test content and its strategies. The researcher concludes that due to these consequences of directing teaching and learning experiences by the standardized tests preparations, the ESL/EFL classes have become more like English language arts classes for native English speakers. Similarly, the results indicate that tests in bilingual classes were found to promote monolingual instruction with test translations guiding decisions about language allocation than bilingual interaction. Other researchers such as Hout and Elliott (2011) and OECD (2011) report that in the United States' schools, where national exams are treated as 'high stakes' for teachers and schools, teaching practices are found tending to lead to an artificial over-inflation of results and thus render the results useless as a measure of real progress.

When it comes to the ESL/EFL context in Bahrain as the target context in this study, national exams are increasingly applied to all schools across the three formal educational stages, i.e. elementary, intermediate and secondary. More, the Ministry of Education will start to allocate some percentages of students' scores in the national exams in the core subjects, which English is one of them, in their cumulative GPAs. This all indicates a growing emphasis on national examinations that eventually might influence the teachers' practices in this regard by directing their pedagogies to prepare students for the national exams. However, according to the knowledge of the researcher, there haven't been any such studies that were conducted to explore ESL/EFL teachers' beliefs or perceptions about the target testing policy nor that some were conducted to investigate the impact of the current national examinations policy on the EFL/ESL teachers' teaching practices and pedagogical styles in Bahraini schools. Nonetheless, students in secondary education are the ones who are currently affected by their performance in the national exams as their CGPAs involve a certain percentage of their scores in the national exams in the main core subjects, the matter that is believed to direct their teachers to focus more on considering the test content than curriculum content during their teaching to these students.

METHOD

RQ1: To what extent has the policy of applying the English language national exam in secondary education influenced the teaching and learning of English as ESL/EFL from the perspective of English language teachers in the Bahraini Secondary schools?

RQ2: How do English language teachers in Bahraini secondary schools perceive these influences in relation to their current professional knowledge about themselves as EFL/ESL teachers in a non-native English-speaking context?

To achieve answering these two questions and bearing in mind the cultural and socially accepted norms of the Bahraini society, the ESL/EFL teachers' beliefs were investigated quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative methodology was adopted through an analytical descriptive design of the study. This methodology was found suitable to answer question one in this study as it allowed to measure the addressed variables objectively and from a holistic perspective in order to develop a generalization of the obtained findings to the target context in this regard. Accordingly, process of data collection, analysis and discussion were expressed from a positivistic paradigm point of view in which the scientific method is the main method to be applied. According to Kerlinger (1970, p.11), the scientific method is "a systematic, controlled, empirical, and critical investigation of hypothetical propositions about the presumed relations among natural phenomena". It is based on the ontological assumption that the universe is ordered and is made up of "atomistic, discrete and observable" events that are causally related. Reality in positivism therefore is seen as single and external to the researcher. Bernstein (1983, p.9) describes it as "a world of objective reality that exists independently of us and that has a determinate nature or essence that we can know, [...] and knowledge is achieved when a subject correctly mirrors or represents objective reality". Hence, scientific researchers assume an independent role to maintain an objective, value-free relationship between them (the knower) and the object of inquiry (the knowable). In order to avoid bias, these researchers establish detachment from the inquiry setting by using instruments as intermediary devices for data collection purposes (Cohen & Manion, 2003).

On the other hand, the qualitative approach was carried out to answer the study's question two. Qualitative data obtained in this regard were shaped according to four components that constitute the paradigmatic view towards reality from this perspective. According to (Crotty, 2003), they are meaning construction, social interaction, cultural, and the teaching contexts. Therefore, the respondents' responses in this study were considered as actively constructed and reshaped. This is because every individual fundamentally is believed to construct his or her own knowledge or understanding of the world and the situation he or she is faced with in his or her own way (Silverman, 2001). However, these created meanings are not always fixed as they can constantly change over time and across contexts (Pring, 2003).

Method & Instrumentation

A mixed method approach was followed in this study. Questionnaires were used to collect data and answer the quantitative part as required in question one. The

administration of the questionnaire aimed to determine and describe the main aspects that shape the English secondary teachers' beliefs about the areas of their teaching that have been influenced by the application of the English national examination in their secondary education context. This also corresponds to the descriptive analytical nature of question one as explained in the methodology part in this study. For the questionnaire, it was developed according to the objectives stated by the Directorate of National Examinations (DNE) at BQA about the application of English national exam for grade 12 students in secondary education. Consequently, the questionnaire consisted of three parts. The first part is a covering letter in which the topic and purpose of the study are stated to the participants in addition to an instruction on how to respond to its statements as it is designed on a Likert scale requesting the participants to respond to one of the five responses provided to them (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, strongly disagree), which fulfils the ethical part for running questionnaires to the sample (Oppenheim, 1996) as shown below:

Table 1
Method of Survey Analysis

Statements	Strongly agree 5	Agree 4	Neutral 3	Disagree 2	Strongly disagree 1
Positive					
Negative					

The second part of the questionnaire asks for some background data about the participants while the third part consists of 30 statements that belong to 6 domains derived from the objectives of applying national examinations in the Kingdom of Bahrain as stated by the DNE-BQA.

As a result, the *mean* score for each statement would be between (1-5), therefore students' responses were evaluated according to the following scale:

Table 2
Scale of Responses Judgment

Judgment	<i>M</i>
Low	1.00 – 2.5
Average	2.6 – 3.9
High	4.00 – 5.00

In addition, the type of the statements was also considered by classifying them into positive and negative statements as shown in the following table:

Table 3
Distribution of Questionnaire Items

Items	Positive	Negative	Total
Item no.	1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8-9-11-13-14-15-19	3-5-6-9-12-15-18-20-25-27-30	
Total	19	11	30

To ensure the validity of the developed questionnaire, a copy of it was sent for review and validation by faculty colleagues at Bahrain Teachers College, who collaborated with the DNE-BQA in developing test items and the test specifications document for K12 English national exam. The received feedback from those colleagues showed an

agreement of 83% with most of the questionnaire content. Furthermore, all their suggestions and recommendations were considered to ensure maximum clarity, simplicity and smoothness for the participants when they were responding to the questionnaire's statements (Dornyei, 2003). Regarding the reliability of the questionnaire, it was measured by calculating the Alpha Cronbach factor through using the SPSS software. The obtained result was (0.889) and this indicates a high reliability of the questionnaire statements and their relevance to the topic under investigation in this study.

Finally, the questionnaire was administered on a random sample of English language teachers from different secondary schools among the 4 governorates in the Kingdom of Bahrain, they were: The Capital, Muharraq, Sothorn and Northern governorates. The purpose behind this procedure was to allow for equal geographical representation of the target population of secondary English language teachers in the Kingdom of Bahrain to enable possible generalization of the obtained results to the target context.

Regarding the qualitative part, the best way to collect data in that regard was through conducting semi-structured interviews with an opportunity sample of the study participants. For the interviews, the questions were formed in relation to the domains developed for the questionnaire. The purpose behind this procedure was to create opportunities for in-depth investigation of issues that would arise from the questionnaire findings. Then, the interview questions were piloted with one of the faculty colleagues before the actual use in the real context. The piloted interview was performed in English; however, the use of mother tongue [Arabic in the context of this study] was also used during the actual conduction of the interviews with the study participants. The main purposes behind this were a) to ensure that the participants were able enough to express themselves clearly and confidently, and b) to make them feel free and comfortable during the interview as this was found useful to "avoid paying too much attention on asking the right questions in the right order which could result in a peculiar social dynamic which may be unsatisfactory for this type of data" (Mason, 1996, p.67). The approximate duration for the interviews was between 20 to 25 minutes. All the interviews were conducted with the participants' in the teachers' room in their schools. This was done to made the participants feel more relaxed and secured in addition to facilitate the conduction of the focused groups' discussion.

With regard to the interviews, they were conducted as individuals ($n=7$) and focus groups ($n=2, 4$ in each). The purpose behind using these two techniques was that individual interviews are found to be a useful technique to have an in-depth understanding of individual's beliefs and opinions (DiGiacomo, Philips, & Davidson, 2007). In addition, the focus group discussion is seen as a facilitated interview technique that can be used with a group of participants in which those participants can talk among themselves rather than interacting with the researcher so that more insightful data can be obtained to support or enrich those obtained from the individual interviews (Cohen, Manison, & Morrison, 2011). This is exactly what was done in this regard as the respondents were left to interact with each other while the researcher acted as a facilitator to their discussion.

Finally, the respondents' responses were recorded for transcription and analysis of the data. They were also shared with the participants for respondent validation in order to ensure a representative presentation of the secondary English language teachers' views and beliefs of the English national examination for K12 on their teaching practices.

Participants

The study was conducted on a random sample of English language teachers ($n=60$) who were teaching English at secondary schools in Bahrain. Out of the total targeted in this study, 53 participants did the questionnaire while 20, from the same 53 participants who did the questionnaire, joined the interviews. These participants were non-native English-speaking teachers who graduated from different Arab universities in Bahrain, Jordan, Egypt and Tunisia. Most of them hold the same qualifications as their colleagues in elementary and intermediate educations, such as B.A. in English and education and many of them hold permanent post in their schools. They all have been teaching grade 12, which is the stage where the English national exam is given at for secondary students. The participants were also sharing the teaching of similar courses, core and specialized courses, and their teaching loads were varying from 12 to 15 teaching hours per week. Most of them also went through orientation sessions about the conduction of English national exam for grade 12 and they all participated in the central marking sessions held for marking the target exam in the last years 2017-2018 and 2016-2017.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Quantitative Results

As an answer to research question one in this study, the questionnaire results display clear effects of the application of the grade 12 English national exam on the secondary English language teachers' teaching practices from the perspectives of the study participants. These effects are reflected in the general responses the participants made which ranged between high and moderate mean scores in most of the questionnaire domains. The following table provides an overall summary of the participants' responses in this regard:

Table 3

Overview of Participants' Responses to the Questionnaire Domains

Domain	Mean	S.D.	Judgment	Order
Effects on Students Learning	4.164	0.91516	High	1
Effects on Students' Welfare	2.994	0.77464	Low	6
Effective Assessment	3.954	0.898872	Average	2
Language Accuracy	3.462	1.09834	Average	3
Language Competency	3.048	1.14592	Average	5
Using Innovative Teaching Practices	3.422	0.73152	Average	4

It can be noticed from the above results that secondary EFL teachers believe that the application of the English language national exam has influenced their teaching of English as EFL/ESL in three major trends:

Directing teaching towards specific learning outcomes

According to table 1, the teachers find the English national exam for grade 12 as an influential mean that has directed their teaching to focus more on fulfilling their students' immediate learning needs than in assisting them to create new learning experiences or implement new teaching strategies. This can be interpreted from their responses to domain1 ($M= 4.164$) as the majority of them believed that the national exam was an effective method that directed their teaching to their ESL/EFL students towards clear and specific purposes. This general view is clearly indicated in those teachers' responses to domain one as shown in table 4:

Table 4

Effects of National Exam Application on Teaching English for Students' Learning

The application of English National Exam:	Mean	S.D.	Judgment	Order
Helped me direct students to what they should exactly learn in English.	2.10	1.4290	Low	5
Assisted me to decide on how my students should learn ESL/EFL.	2.98	1.0639	Moderate	4
Didn't assist me to make my students' learning more interesting.	4.01	1.1005	High	2
Encouraged me to organize my students' learning and make it logical.	4.03	.9798	High	1
Limited my chance to create more opportunities for my students to support each other.	2.12	1.1564	Low	3

Yet, the mean scores registered for statements 3 (4.01) and 5 (2.12) in table 2 also indicate that the majority of the participants considered the application of the national exam as a barrier that has limited their chances to design more interesting lessons or prevented them from creating enough collaborative learning opportunities for their students. In fact, it seems that those teachers considered the application of the target exam as a major factor in limiting their teaching authority in terms of how far they as teachers could decide on the shape of their teaching and what they would need to do to make their teaching more exciting to their students. The low response registered for statement 4 (4.03) reflects this view and can be more justified by correlating it to their moderate response to statement 2 (2.98) in which they expressed their view of how the application of the national exam has imposed specific teaching methods on how they should teach the target language to their ESL/EFL students.

This view corroborates with those teachers' view on how the application of this exam has limited their attempts as EFL/ESL teachers to fully respond to their students' welfare needs as foreign language learners. This is what can be asserted by the result shown in table 1, where the lowest response made by the participants was registered in domain two of the questionnaire ($M=2.994$) as this domain is ranked as the last in terms of the participants' responses to all the domains of the questionnaire. More specifically, the results revealed that those teachers believed that the application policy of this exam prevented them to respond to their students' individual learning needs, fulfil their interests or align their teaching with their students' expectations. The results obtained for statement 6 (1.83) and statement 9 (1.81) confirm this fact. However, it was also noticed that the participants perceived the English national examination as a good opportunity to teach their students some new skills even though these skills might not

necessarily correspond to their students' current language needs and interests (4.39). More, the application of the national exam was found to be helpful to them to design effective materials for their students to learn the language (4.11). The following table illustrates the results of these findings:

Table 5

Effects of National Exam Application on Teaching English for Students' Welfare

The application of English National Exam:	Mean	S.D.	Judgment	Order
Didn't encourage me to rethink my understanding of some aspects of my students' learning needs or interests.	1.83	.7268	Low	4
Shifted my teaching to align with what students are supposed to learn.	2.83	.9753	Moderate	3
Encouraged me teach my students new skills.	4.39	.7681	High	1
didn't facilitate my identification of my students' learning needs.	1.81	.6521	Low	5
Initiated me to design more effective materials for students' learning.	4.11	.7509	High	2

Rogers et al. (2007) report similar findings in their study which they carried out on a group of ESL/EFL instructors to explore their beliefs about assessment and evaluation in foreign language teaching. Those instructors were found to believe that giving standardized assessment and evaluation tests provide valuable learning experiences for their students to prepare them for specific purposes, which usually are passing the exam. However, the same instructors believed that despite these effective experiences, they were limited to only enabling the students to prepare for the test. The same study reports views of dissatisfaction by those instructors of their students' learning as those instructors believed that their students showed less self-satisfied or motivated to use the language and interact with them. Brady (2008) justifies for this belief by explaining that one of the consequences that normally arises from teaching for the test is the weak relationship that would occur between the teachers and their students due to the transparent and neutral policy the teachers normally try to follow to avoid personal judgments that would negatively affect their students' performance and preparation for the standardized test. In the current study, the participants' views reinforce this fact and imply that those participants believe they lost total ownership of the teaching methods and styles they would like to do with their students. This is justified by their belief that the application of the national exam demanded them to focus on some teaching techniques and skills to enable their students to do and pass the target exam.

Reinforcing teaching for language competency than language accuracy

On a different perspective, the obtained results revealed how teachers of English in secondary schools see the English national exam as a promotion for implementing teaching practices that reinforce students' language competency skills than language accuracy skills. This view is indicated in those teachers' responses to statements 23 and 24 which reflects how the national exam has led those teachers to expose their students to the diverse situations during their preparation of their students to the exam. The results shown table 6 illustrates these views in more detail:

Table 6
Effects of National Exam Application on Teaching English for Language Competency

The application of English National Exam:	Mean	S.D.	Judgment	Order
21. Made my teaching more communicative- focused than skill focused.	2.10	1.4290	Low	5
22. Encouraged me to develop contextual activities to my students when practicing writing and listening skills.	2.98	1.0639	Moderate	4
23. Provided an opportunity for me to expose students to different types of reading texts.	4.01	1.1005	High	2
24. Gave my students more opportunities to practice using the language in different planned situations.	4.03	.9798	High	1
25. Limited my practices to certain language usages.	2.12	1.1564	Low	3

Paradoxically, it is found that those teachers did not find the teaching practices mentioned in statements 23 and 24 helpful to make their lessons more communicative but rather more skill-focused as shown in the mean score (2.10) registered for statement 21. This finding integrates with the results obtained for the statements related to the language accuracy domain, especially statements 17 and 19 in which the participants expressed their high agreement on how the application of the English national exam motivated them to focus more on their students' common mistakes and practicing specific listening exercises. Nonetheless, the participants viewed the application of the national exam in this regard as a useful method to reinforce students' usage skills of the language as shown in statement 25. Consequently, this could be the reason for why those teachers found the exam encouraging them to use summative assessment more than formative assessment. This is asserted by the participants in their response to statement 16 of the questionnaire, which implies that the national exam has negatively influenced the amount of formative feedback that ESL/EFL teachers could give to their students when they are learning the English as ESL/EFL. Table 5 below summarizes these facts:

Table 7
Effects of National Exam Application on Teaching English for Language Accuracy

The application of English National Exam:	Mean	S.D.	Judgment	Order
16. Motivated me to be more precise in my reviews of students' works.	2.12	1.4441	Low	5
17. Demanded me to allocate special sessions for discussing common mistakes in my students' writing.	4.13	.9413	High	3
18. Limited my ability to develop divergent reading questions.	2.41	1.2158	Low	4
19. Helped me design listening activities for specific purposes.	4.32	1.0147	High	2
20. Didn't improve my pedagogies for teaching speaking skills.	4.33	.8758	High	1

In the literature, Kinay and Ardiç (2017) examined the beliefs of prospective teachers about standardized testing in terms of some variables. Using a survey to measure their samples' beliefs about standardized testing, the researchers found that their participants have moderate beliefs of standardized tests as a means for improving their teaching practices. The reason behind this belief is that those teachers think that standardized

testing tends to measure accuracy more than the ability of language function in real contexts. This is exactly what is found in this study in the way those secondary EFL teachers felt the application of the national exam required them to focus their teaching on practicing specific language skills and techniques, specifically reading, listening and writing as shown in the questionnaire, for the purpose of improving their students' accuracy but not competency of the language. This finding of achieving accuracy not competency in language learning is also found to go with what Choi (2008) reached in his study. Through providing an overview of the impact of standardized EFL tests on EFL education in Korea, Choi (2008) explored the nature of the EFL tests prevalent in the EFL testing market through investigating the washback effects of EFL tests on EFL teaching based on a survey of stakeholder viewpoints. The overall findings of the survey reveal that the majority of stakeholders (i.e. test-takers and teachers) do not think favorably of the EFL tests due to negative washback effects on their EFL learning and teaching as it puts too much emphasis on preparation for the test and English proficiency level and not support Korean students to induce productive English skills.

Supporting effective assessment practices of EFL/ESL learning

The data analysis show that the majority of the study participants perceived the national exam as a factor that influences their assessment techniques of their EFL/ESL students' learning. However, the data also show that this factor is believed by the participants to still not be the main one that influences those teachers' assessment practices during their teaching of EFL/ESL to their secondary students. This can be inferred from the participants' moderate response ($M= 3.95$) registered for domain 3 as shown in table 1. Generally, it is obvious that those teachers view the application of the national exam as positively impacting their assessment practices in the way this exam acts as a guide for them in their development of their own tests and what their feedback should focus on when they want to give to their students. Also, those teachers considered the national exam as a motive for them to reflect on their teaching and assessment practices in order to find better ways to support their students' learning of EFL/ESL. Table 8 below displays this in the results obtained for statements 14, 13, and 12.

Table 8
Effects of National Exam Application on Teaching English for Effective Assessment

The application of English National Exam:	Mean	S.D.	Judgment	Order
Made my teaching more aligned with students' expectations.	2.69	1.2053	Moderate	5
Didn't encourage me to think about how best to tackle my students' assessment.	4.09	.7142	High	3
Helped me improve the quality of my feedback to my students.	4.49	.6967	High	2
Made me more aware of testing techniques to consider in my formative assessment to my students.	4.47	.60776	High	1
Didn't expose my students to a different assessment experience.	4.03	1.2704	High	4

However, the results obtained for statements 15 and 11 indicate that the same participants find the exam to limit their students' expectations and abilities to what the exam requires and assesses, which implies that the application of the national exam has

prevented the students from being exposed to other forms of experiences where their performance in the target language can be assessed differently and up to their expectations.

Several researchers (e.g. Alderson & Wall, 1993; Shohamy, 2001) support the above reached findings and state that teachers have always been found to believe that tests represent a powerful influence on their pedagogical practices and on their students' performances in general, which limits their selection and use of content material and learning experience since it is usually determined by the exam content and skills but not their learners' interests or needs. Consequently, other several empirical studies also (e.g. Saville & Hawkey, 2004; Cheng, Watanabe & Curtis, 2004) explain that this impact of the test in language testing, which is now often used to describe the consequences a test may have at the micro, or local teaching level (i.e., washback), will also be considered at a macro or societal level, which requires the language test designers to locate both concepts within the larger notion of consequential validity to ensure more fairness and ethicality of giving standardized tests to EFL/ESL learners.

Aligning teaching to the national exam requirements

With regard to the participants' views of the national exam effects on their teaching pedagogies, the obtained results assert the previous finding reported earlier that the application of the national exam was perceived to impede implementation of new teaching methods and that the national exam limited those participants from trying new teaching methods. This is indicated in the obtained result for statement 29 in the questionnaire and it corroborates with those participants' responses to statement 26 as it seems that those teachers view the concept 'different' teaching techniques as not necessarily means implementing 'new' teaching practices or techniques. Another finding that asserts what was reported earlier in this study is the fact that those teachers view themselves being more responsible to associate their teaching with what students will be exposed to in the exam. Their high responses to statement 30 indicate how those teachers viewed themselves as the ones whose students' success or failure in learning EFL/ESL depends on. Nevertheless, their responses also reflect how those teachers had focused their teaching on the skills and competencies that are explicitly shown in the exam. This was clearly indicated in their responses to statement 27. A summary of these findings illustrated in the following table:

Table 9

Effects of National Exam Application on Using Innovative Teaching Practices

The application of English National Exam:	Mean	S.D.	Judgment	Order
26. Required me to use different teaching techniques.	3.13	.9206	Moderate	4
27. Made me more responsible of students' success or failure.	4.09	.7142	High	2
28. Enabled me become more reflective on my teaching.	4.05	.8415	High	3
29. Motivated me to apply new teaching methods.	1.50	.5414	Low	5
30. Didn't help me to more integrate the four skills in my teaching.	4.34	.6047	High	1

The above findings corroborate again with what Kinay and Ardiç (2017) reached in their study in the way how the use of standardized or national exams tests limits the positive effect in instructional decisions for the EFL/ESL teachers as it leads teachers to focus on

a more teacher-centered teaching and creates a less inclusive classroom environment for students coming from disadvantaged groups. However, the current study's results contradict with Kinay and Ardiç (2017) that the use of national or standard exams limits the professionalism of the EFL teachers. In fact, the participants in this study revealed how the use of the national exam has made them more reflective on their current teaching practices, which they considered as a form of professional development. Yet, the obtained findings above imply the teachers' belief of the national exam as a valid and reliable method of assessment as allows them to monitor and measure their students' progress more objectively and transparently. This is opposite to what Troudi *et al.* (2009) report in their study about standardized testing that teachers view it as limiting their voice regarding their students' progress and marginalize their roles with the top-down managerial approach. This could be due to the fact teachers in the Bahraini context are invited to participating in designing test items for the national exam and there are involved in the marking process as well.

Qualitative Results

As mentioned in the method of research part, the semi-structured interviewed were used in individual interviews (n=7) and focus group discussions (n=2 with 4 each). Three main questions were asked to the respondents to answer and discuss. They were: (1) What were your experiences in preparing your students for taking the English national exam? Give examples, (2) In what ways do you think that the application of the English national exam has influenced your teaching? and (3) How do you see the English national exam for grade 12 as a factor that could improve your teaching as an EFL teacher in secondary school?

After the data were transcribed, they were coded and categorized. The respondents' views about how their teaching of EFL/ESL was affected by the application of the English national exam were coded as positive, negative, or having contradictory views. The responses and arguments that support each position in terms of their relation to the effects on their teaching of EFL/ESL to their secondary students were mentioned as an evidence and support to those respondents' position and discussed for further understanding of those teachers' beliefs about the effects happened on their teaching due to the application of the English national exam. It's worth to mention at this stage that the different dynamics and interaction in each group and with each individual participant were considered only in their reference to the major responses that found repetitive among all the respondents' responses for the purposes of this study.

"Preparation for the test is not bad!"

This is an emergent finding from the respondents' responses that is found to be resulted from the earlier beliefs about the national exam influence on their teaching and fulfilment of their students' needs. Several participants viewed their teaching of test techniques and skills to their students as positive and fundamental. This was reflected in words like *"new skills"*, *"important skills/techniques"*, *"useful activity/ies"*, *"very necessary"*, *"required"*, *"needed for college study"*, *"authentic"* and *"reliable"*. In this regard, it's worth to mention that the respondents were viewed their teaching practices with their students as 'preparation for the test' not 'teaching for the test'. As

directly stated by T (1) when he was asked about how the national exam has influenced his teaching that it enabled him to “prepare his students for the test and not only teaching them for passing the test”. From this perspective, preparation for the test is believed to be more comprehensive and curriculum –based teaching than just exercising test activities to train on the test. This belief was illustrated in one of the group discussions as shown below:

T10: “preparing my students to the national exam requires me to do many things starting by planning for my lesson to see where particular skills and activities required in the exam are mentioned in the curriculum.”

T11: “Me too! [nodding her head] ... I do this and also I explain to them test skills to see how they implement them in their classroom activities.”

T 12: “I agree ... though my lesson is planned to focus on specific skills and content, the required techniques in the test inspires me most of the time to apply additional techniques which enrich my lesson and I feel that students more interact with me at”

The above group discussion represents a typical logic that was found in most of this study's participants' responses. For them, they believe that the national exam assisted them to prepare their students for fundamental skills and knowledge and did not narrow their teaching. In addition, many of them believed that ‘preparation for the test’ did not negatively influence the assessment of their students. In fact, most of them agreed that the application of the national exam “limited the inflation in [their] students' grades” (T4) and “supported their formative assessment results of [their] students” (T7). Teachers (3) and (9) stated that national exams supported their “evaluation decisions of [their] students when [they] are asked to justify to school such student's grade”.

One main reason behind this positive belief about teaching for the test is that the respondents find that the training and orientation sessions they joined about the English national exam helped them to be more aware and conscious enough to consider this issue starting from their planning for their lesson and ending with their actual teaching inside the classroom. The testimony made by T (8) displays this belief:

“I am not worried about directing students to exercise for the purpose of the test only as we went through special training before the national exam for English in K12 was first implemented. Many of us also attended information sessions on the national exam and how the test is formatted and designed. This in fact boosted my teaching skills not limited it.”

Beliefs about 'stress and curriculum demands' resulted by the national exam

Interestingly, the analysis of qualitative data didn't show positive side only of the fact but also another negative side of it. The analysis of the individual interviews and discussion groups showed feelings of concerns and frustration that are linked to the application of the English national exam for secondary students. These feelings are seen to echo in the words “*stress*”, “*demanding*”, “*obliged*”, “*required*”, “*needed to*”, “*over-loaded*”, “*unfair*” and “*unequal*” that were found across the respondents' replies to the interview questions or through their group discussions, which reflects their belief about how the application of the national exam turned their teaching duties to be more

stressful and demanding. The participants mentioned many reasons for their stress caused by the exam. For instance, some found that “*responding to both the curriculum and test requirements and content is too difficult for them*” T (5), T (4) & T (1). Other believed that lesson planning has become more complicated.

Some others believed the application of the target exam required them to be more focused in their teaching, which they found difficult and confusing most of the time. T (7) reported that he “*was teaching reading to students and they were really interested sharing different information about the topic but as some point [he] felt [he] had to move from this to exercise what should be considered in the reading part of the exam ...*”. T (2) added that “*sometimes I do activities that don’t cover the aims of the curriculum but they cover the aims of the test, which makes me worried and stressed*”, while T (9) stated that this stress leads to “*covering part of the curriculum and the test which is badly affects the quality and quantity of the teaching and learning experiences*”.

What is more, many participants informed that their students’ test scores have become a major source of stress to them that made them highly believe in the need to involve teaching for the exam in their planning of their lessons. The following discussion asserts this belief:

T13: I plan for practicing exam exercises with my students because I am too worried they do not do well in the test [...] this is not good for me as a teacher!

T15: Me too .. I insist on exposing them to at least one technique of the exam in every lesson to ensure they get trained .. so that I avoid complaints or low performance evaluation.

T 14: I consider practicing for the exam in my everyday teaching so that I can guarantee my students receive sufficient training which will eventually be reflected on their exam scores.

Though this emphasis on stress and demands to fulfil both the test and curriculum needs for their students, those teachers did not seem to perceive this as a type of narrowing their teaching of the required curriculum, which confirms their belief reported earlier that they find the application of the national exam as a source for supplying their teaching with new techniques and skills plus making it more focused and specific. This was straightforward shown to me when I asked the two focus groups about this. Their responses clarified how they perceive “*stressful teaching*” as not a reason for “*narrowing teaching the curriculum*” T (10), T (11), & T (12) and that “*careful/complex planning for the lesson*” and “*fulfilling curriculum and test aims*” were factors of motivation to enrich their teaching and making it “*more effective*” T (13), T (14), & T (15)..

IMPLICATIONS

The qualitative findings above demonstrate that EFL secondary teachers in Bahrain believe that the English national exam represents an extra-curricular source for them from which they have managed to improve and develop their teaching practices. This

belief of influence on their teaching was reflected in their positive views of the application of the national exam in English language and in their way of utilizing the exam design and techniques as their teaching strategies for teaching definite skills, mainly, reading, writing and listening to their students. Morris (2011) describes this form of practice as 'strategic behaviors' that are carried out by the teachers to achieve short-term outcomes, which are normally enabling students to achieve their tests (p. 37). However, it appears that those teachers' beliefs of this 'strategic behavior' that it is useful to maintain long-term outcomes as represented in functioning the language in authentic situations and enriching their students' learning experiences by directing their students to focus on developing their language competency skills than just language accuracy skills. This sort of belief about practice informed by the test is described by Popham (1999) as 'curriculum-teaching'. Popham (1999), differentiates between two types of teaching, 'item-teaching' which refers to teaching to the test and instruction which aims to focus on the subject matter that will be covered in the test. According to him, when teachers organize their instruction around the body of subject content and at the same time they are aligning it to the target test's knowledge and skills, this is not considered teaching to the test as it does not neglect the other curriculum areas that might not be assessed in the test. However, it is worth to note that even if the test was believed to be a source of new teaching and useful teaching methods, such as problem solving and critical thinking, still the teachers need to limit their dependence on using the test materials in their teaching as this will eventually narrow the learning experiences of those teachers' students. In a study carried out by Kellaghan et al. (2009), they found that although teaching to the test can improve students' creative, innovative and oral skills, it also emphasizes rote memorization and a more passive approach to learning as teachers spend more time developing test-taking strategies rather than cultivating students' problem-solving skills.

Consequently, the above implication can also be correlated to those teachers' beliefs of stress and curriculum demands resulted from the application of the national exam. The participants in this study reported feelings of insufficient fulfilment of the curriculum subject-content due to the other skills and knowledge that they needed to practice with their students. According to Eurydice (2009), this is called 'narrowing curriculum' and it is different from 'teaching to the test' as teachers in this regard tend to adapt or restrict their content focus according to the areas of the curriculum that will be involved in the test. This can consequently affect the quality and comprehensiveness of the lesson plan developed by those teachers (Menken, 2006).

To conclude, it is advised that those teachers should be involved in the national test development and implementation of the target test. This occurs partially in the way English teachers in Bahrain are involved in the marking process. Yet, this is not enough. They should be trained on developing test items and required accordingly to participate in developing the test items. The teachers should also be trained on how to analyse the test results and a careful system of incentives should be constructed to promote positive behaviors of applying the test rather than just strategic behaviors which might be perceived negative behaviors on the long-term run of the national exam. Regarding 'narrowing curriculum' effect, it can be minimized by diversifying the areas from the

curriculum that are involved in the national exam to differ from a year to another. This procedure will ensure the teachers' coverage of the curriculum parts and at the same time it will not affect the consistency and design of the target exam.

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