

## **Raising the Stakes of High School Exit Exams: Students’ Perspectives of their English Learning Motivation in a High-Stakes Test Change Context**

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### **Abstract**

Research on high-stakes tests indicates that increasing the stakes of large-scale English language tests will have consequential influence on teaching and learning performance and practices. However, evidence for influence on student ‘motivation for learning English (MLE)’ within such a context is still scarce. Taken this, the present study investigated the motivational level of high school students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in the context of *university entrance requirement tests change* in Iran (introducing high school national English achievement tests-NEATs- as new requirements for entrance into nation-state universities). For such a purpose, the MLE scale, taken from Gardner’s (2004) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery, was translated into Persian, administered among 451 randomly selected students supposed to take the NEATs for their admission to universities, and subjected to confirmatory factor analyses. The results obtained through within-group ANOVA comparisons of the construct-validated subscales revealed that under increased stakes of the NEATs the participants maintained moderately high level of motivation for the two components of ‘desire to learn English’ and ‘attitudes towards learning’; however, the level for the component of ‘motivational intensity’ was neutral/moderate. Similar result (i.e., moderate level) was found in the participants’ perspective of their overall MLE. The findings, overall, indicate that the NEATs-admission programme has not demotivated the learners yet they are not as highly motivated as intended by the change planners. Such a divergence between the ideal policies (i.e., *high level of MLE*) and what was observed in practice (i.e., *neutral/moderate MLE level*) has implications for test change contexts and their driving policies.

**Keywords:** Test-led Changes; High-stakes Tests; University Entrance Examinations (UEEs); Motivation for Learning English (MLE)

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## 1. Introduction

A growing body of research on standardized high-stakes language tests or their alternatives has suggested that language learners' affective variables are influenced by the test context to which they are exposed (e.g., Bai, 2020; Cheng et al., 2014; Gardner, 2005, 2007; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003; Pae, 2008). Among these variables, *language learning motivation* has received much attention from many researchers, due to its functional relevance to second language (L2) learning and performance within such test contexts. For instance, the emerging literature on English<sup>3</sup>Language Teaching (ELT) innovation and change projects reveals that reformed high-stakes tests can have positive or negative effects on individuals' level of motivation, and consequently, on their ultimate success or failure in learning in these contexts (see Dörnyei, 2003; Pan & Newfields, 2012; Watanabe, 2001; Wu & Lee, 2017). An important assumption underlying much of these test change projects is that improved tests or examinations can improve not only learners' cognitive outcomes (e.g., L2 achievement and the relevant performance scores) but their attitudinal outcomes (e.g., motivation, attitudes, etc.) as well. Given this, in Iran, the global rhetoric of 'assessment-led reform' met the local constraints and circumstances of the high-stake University Entrance Examinations (UEEs), at the turn of this century, and introduced a reform in the country's UEEs programme.

In nutshell, the drive for pushing through an assessment-led reform in the entrance programme of Iranian universities derives from a synthesis of the global claims that view high-stake test reform as critical 'levers for change' (Alderson & Banerjee, 2001, p.214; Pearson, 1988, p.101) and the local dissatisfactions with long-lasting testing hegemony of the tertiary selection system. In concrete, the ultimate outcome of such intense debates on reform in the *UEEs testing agenda* recommended for a policy remedy to supplant the long-lasting one-shot multiple choice (MC) UEEs with more cumulative records that could count on students' academic background. The result of this reform policy was the 'Act of Student Admission to Universities' (Parliament Act, 2007) to gradually replace the UEEs, annually designed and administered by the NOET (National Organization for Educational Tests or what is locally called *Sanjesh Organization*), with the high school national achievement examinations designed from high school curricular subject matters. According to the Act, enforced from 2009 onward, students' performance scores on large-scale national achievement tests are used to fulfill an important part of the requirement scores for entrance to the nation-state universities (Act of Student Admission to Universities, p.4).

According to the new policy, as an alternative to performance on English section of the UEEs (i.e., EUEEs), performance on high school National English Achievement Tests (NEATs) is supposed to play a crucial role in students' selection and admission cycle as long as English is a compulsory requirement and determining building block of this cycle. The NEATs, designed from high school English curriculum, include both MC and recognition items as well as production items (short and complete answers), and are administered by the Ministry of Education (ME) in each June as a summative assessment of English language achievement. In addition to the primary purpose of opting for a more *valid, fair, and quality criterion*, the

new policy alleged to gradually induce positive consequences on both teaching and learning practices of all school subjects, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL). More specifically, the logic of local policymakers' and planners was that in replacing UEEs with NEATs, the NEATs common context would enrich students' learning through increasing the level and rate of their positive emotions (e.g., L2 learning motivation) and decreasing the level and rate of their negative emotions (e.g., L2 learning stress). In effect, they also took such insights from several studies done on the 'UEEs detrimental effects' into their claims for the NEATs. Evidence in support of their claims is research done by Rejali et al. (2002) and Hajforoush (2002) who reported negative emotions, such as test anxiety, and decreased self-confidence and attitudes among those candidates who were not admitted to universities through once-a-year competitive UEEs programme. These studies also reported the UEEs negative effects on school curricular practices and learning/teaching objectives.

Following Kane (2002), McNamara and Roever (2006) and Messick's (1996) arguments that a test or its alternative should be evaluated in terms of its perceived effectiveness and consequences as parts of its validity, the intended effects of the new entrance criteria on students' level of motivation, as claimed by the change policymakers and planners (ShayesteFar & Kiany, 2018), were examined in this study. Taking this perspective, the present study, therefore, aimed to obtain evidence for the validity of such an optimistic view in terms of the contribution of the new entrance criteria (i.e., NEATs) to the enhancement of high-school students' motivation for English language learning.

Evidently, different terms and categorizations have been introduced and used for conceptualizing L2 learning motivation, for instance, 'intrinsic vs. extrinsic' (Brown, 2000; Deci & Ryan, 1985) or 'integrative vs. instrumental' motivation (Dörnyei, 2003; Gardner, 1985), however, this study did not take such a detailed dichotomy or typology to distinguish between types and kinds of motivation. Instead, it used Gardner and his associates' (see Gardner, 2007; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991, 1993; Masgoret & Gardner, 2003) conceptualization generally describing motivation as 'desire to learn', 'intention and efforts (motivational intensity)' and 'attitudes toward learning'. This conceptualization, illustrated more clearly through Gardner's (2004) socio-educational (SE) model of L2 learning, has more direct implication to the local testing context of the present study. Though the SE model was originally created and applied in Canadian context, it has been internationally used, for decades, in different research contexts as long as English is spread and used throughout the world. Aligned with this important line, English language learning motivation has also been a widely explored issue by L2 motivation studies in Iran (e.g., Alavi & Mehmandoust, 2011; Kafi & Motallebzadeh, 2015; Khoshsima & Shokri, 2017; Zeynali, Pishghadam & Fatemi, 2019, to name just a few). Located within the discipline of emotional and attitudinal consequences of high-stakes tests, the present study employed the SE conceptualization to highlight the importance of both social and educational environment for the development of L2 motivation and imply that perceptions and attitudes towards learning context have effect on rate and level of motivation, and subsequently on the learning and achievement within this context.

The following research question, therefore, emerged and guided this study:

*To what extent does the NEATs-based admission programme to nation-state universities influence Iranian high school students' motivation for English language learning?*

## **2. Method**

### *2.1. Participants and Setting*

In addition to influencing the teaching side, affecting learning outcomes (whether cognitive or affective) as a basis for learning improvement was also intended by the reform policies. In an attempt to obtain a more comprehensive picture of change consequences on high school students' English learning motivation, 17 central and suburban high schools in two provinces of Iran (Esfahan and Tehran) were selected first. A cluster sampling procedure was used to collect data in Esfahan province and its various regions. All five educational districts of the city were selected first that led into the random selection of ten schools. Out of each school, 1-2 classes were selected subsequently. To make the sample more representative of the high school EFL context, a convenient sampling procedure was also used in which students from three EFL classes in Tehran were selected as well.

A total number of 17 EFL classes of schools from different geographical regions of the targeted cities, thus, participated in the study. These two provinces are among the largest ones in Iran, with a good student population. Only students of the high school third-grade classes were asked to participate in this study because for the time being only the third-grade exams are administered simultaneously throughout the whole country (2016 onward) and the students of third grade have the experience of preparing and taking these national standardized tests.

From the 490 battery of questionnaires distributed, 468 were returned, out of which 17 questionnaire batteries were discarded because of a predictable pattern in answering also because of a large number of missing items. The present sample consisting of 141 girls (31%) and 310 boys (69%), with the age range of 15-17, was selected from the classes varying from 20 to 30 students. The sample comprised 451 students of three major high school fields (Mathematics, Natural Science, and Humanities).

### *2.2. Instrumentation: 'Motivation to Learn English Scale' -Persian Version (MLES-PV)*

Students' motivation to learn English was assessed by means of 'Motivation for Learning English Scale (MLES)'. This scale is one of the self-report scales of the Attitudes/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) developed by Gardner (2004). As one of the most widely used measures of attitudes and motivation, the AMTB proved to be a valid and reliable instrument (Atay & Kurt, 2010; Gardner 2005). The 30-item MLES comprises of three components/subscales to measure three primary concepts in Gardner's motivation model (Gardner, personal communication, March, 8th, 2011): (1) *Desire to Learn English* with 10 items assessing how much learners want to learn English (e.g., *'I have a strong desire to know all aspects of English'* (item 9 of AMTB), (2) *Attitudes toward Learning English* with 10 items measuring the degree of learners' favorable/unfavorable views and tendencies toward English learning (e.g., *'Learning English is a waste of time'* (item 62 of the AMTB), and (3) *Motivational Intensity* with another 10 items (e.g., *'I can't be bothered trying to understand the more complex aspects*

of English' (item 87 of the AMTB) that indicate the amount of effort a student expends in language learning. For tapping the learners' perceived levels of motivation, they were asked to provide their answer on a 6-point Likert-type scale (1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Disagree, 3=Slightly Disagree, 4=Slightly Agree, 5=Agree, and 6=Strongly Agree).

### 2.3. Procedures and Analyses

Though attitudinal/motivational studies were carried out in the Iranian context of EFL learning (see for e.g., Babamoradi et al., 2018; Challack & Kassaian 2010; Mahdavi Zafarghandi & Jodai, 2012; Zeynali, et al., 2019), neither a Persian version validated for high school levels nor any account of confirmatory factor analysis validation is provided for the MLES. Therefore, the MLES was first translated into Persian version (henceforth called MLES-PV) and then two ELT experts judged the accuracy of translation and back-translation, cultural relevance, and any unambiguousness. After, along with translation of the scale, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) method with AMOS software (version 18: Arbuckle, 2009) was used to provide a validated scale to be used in Iranian schools EFL contexts. The normed Chi-square (shown by CMIN/DF in AMOS outputs), and other Goodness-of-Fit Indices (GFIs) that test the consistency of the proposed model with the pattern of covariations among the observed variables, and the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA), as another informative index of how close the model corresponds with the data, were inspected first.

First, data screening analyses indicated 10 single outliers that were deleted to obtain a satisfactory Multivariate coefficient (Mardia's coefficient=8.40), as an assumption for conducting CFA. Skewness values were below the suggested level  $\pm 2.0$ , ranging from -.017 to .136. Kurtosis values indicated no evidence of overly peaked variables, ranging from -1.55 to .161. AMOS findings revealed a good-fitting model for the MELS-PV (CMIN/DF=2.56, CFI=.92, GFI=.90, RMSEA=.060, see Table 1 for the Goodness-of-Fit Indices). Moderate to high significant factor loadings were found with all items kept in the MLES-PV. All standardized regression weights (equivalent to factor loading) were significant with Critical Ration (CR) vale above the recommended 1.96 (CR> 1.96), p-value <.05, and all error variance  $\leq 1.0$ , indicating no violation of estimates (see Figure 1 for the MLES-PV model).

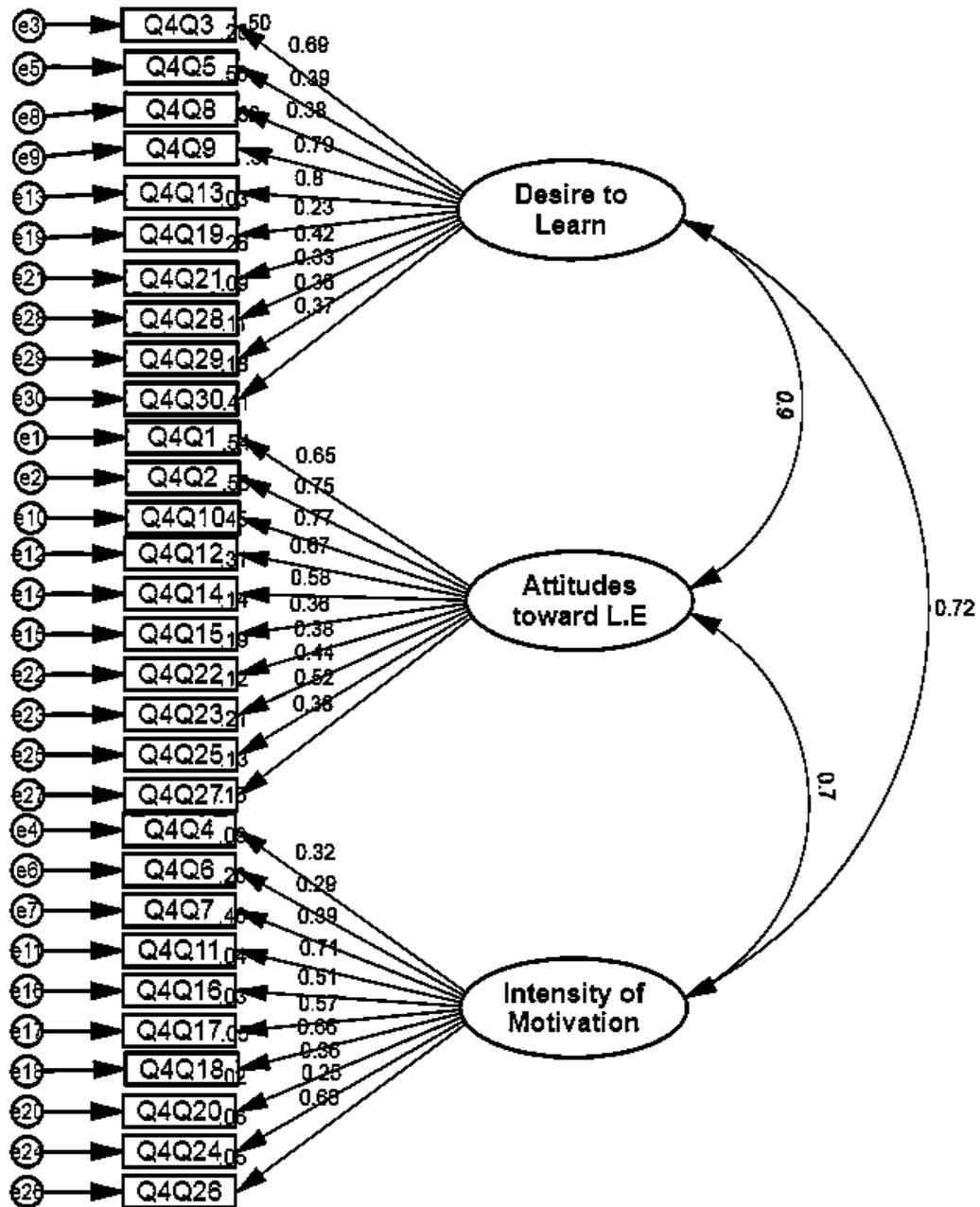


Figure 1. Final confirmatory factor analysis model of MLES-PV

The analysis of the content of items loading on the emerged factors, factor loadings, and p-values of the model could, therefore, well support the 3-component model, i.e., the model with three latent variables, proposed by Gardner. All MLES-PV items describe motivational characteristics that influence learning behaviors and performance. Once the respondents' ratings were collected through the MLES-PV, descriptive analyses (especially means and standard deviations) were run for each component and their individual items.

Table 1.  
*Results of Goodness-of-Fit indices for the MLES-PV*

Goodness of Fit Indices	Recommended value	Model Estimates
$\chi^2$	-	715.9
CMIN/DF	<3.0	2.56
CFI	≥.90	.92
GFI	≥.90	.90
RMSEA	≤.08	.060

The total Cronbach's Alpha was found to be high (.93) and the internal consistency reliability coefficients were found to be .80, .87, and .69 for Desire to Learn English, Attitude towards Learning English, and Motivational Intensity, respectively. The values reported by Masgoret and Gardner (2003) are .84, .93, and .80.

### 3. Results

To identify the degree to which the high school students perceived the new admission programme affected their motivation for English language learning, necessary instructions were first provided in the instrument and the students' rankings of the six-Likert scales were then analyzed for such a purpose. Table 2 depicts the overall mean values of the three motivational components of the MLES-PV.

Table 2.  
*Descriptive statistics of the MLES-PV three subscales*

subscale	N	Minimu m	Maximu m	Mean	Std. Deviatio n
Desire To Learn	451	1.45	6.00	4.08	.98
Motivational Intensity	451	1.50	6.00	3.80	.73
Attitudes toward Learning	451	1.00	6.00	4.05	1.06
Total Motivation	451	1.33	6.00	3.97	.84

Mean scores were then used to interpret the level of motivation. Following Degang's (2010) and Best's (1970, cited by Degang, 2010) system of motivational level identification, the followings were used as criteria to signify the lower and higher levels of motivation in Iranian high school EFL context (see Table 3 below).

Table 3.  
*Interpretation of score results in terms of motivation levels*

Likert Scale	Mean range	Motivational level	Score range
1	Strongly disagree	Low	1-1.99
2	Disagree	Moderately Low	2-2.99
3-4	Slightly Agree/slightly Disagree	Neutral/Moderate	3-3.99
5	Agree	Moderately High	4-4.99
6	Strongly Agree	High	5-6

As the total means in Table 2 indicate, the high school students reported ‘moderately high’ motivation for the two construct of ‘desire to learn English’ and ‘attitudes toward learning’. The reported mean scores of 4.08 (SD=.98) and 4.05 (SD=1.06) show that these learners are almost equally motivated to learn the English language at the same time that they form positive attitudes towards learning.

Further analyses were, however, run to compare mean scores across the three components/facets of motivation using One-way repeated ANOVA. Since the Mauchly’s Test of Sphericity, which is a test of heterogeneity, was met (p-value=.87 that is >.05), the usual ANOVA F was used (see Table 4) for interpretation of the results. As shown in Table 4, despite the similarity of the mean scores, they were statistically different from each other in the subset of ‘desire to learn English’ and the other subset of ‘attitudes towards learning, and motivational intensity’ (F (2, 678 = 65.95; p<.01).

Table 4.  
*Results of One-way Repeated Measure ANOVA*

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Motivational Facets	Sphericity Assumed	29.749	2	14.875	65.956	.000
	Greenhouse-Geisser	29.749	1.763	16.871	65.956	.000
	Huynh-Feldt	29.749	1.772	16.790	65.956	.000
	Lower-bound	29.749	1.000	29.749	65.956	.000
Error(Motivational Facets)	Sphericity Assumed	152.904	678	.226		
	Greenhouse-Geisser	152.904	597.780	.256		
	Huynh-Feldt	152.904	600.668	.255		
	Lower-bound	152.904	339.000	.451		

As the overall means of the three motivational facets indicate, no signs of significantly high level of motivation (5 or beyond) were observed in the present dataset, meaning that the NEATs-based programme has not demotivated the learners as they perceived; however, they are not highly motivated to learn English. Compared to the mean scores of ‘desire to learn English’ and ‘attitudes towards learning’, the mean score of ‘motivational intensity’ was

lower showing a ‘neutral/moderate’ level of motivation. The reported higher mean scores suggest that high school students have a rather positive image and good feelings toward learning English but when it comes to the effort exerted by them to learn the language, they are less motivated ( $\bar{x}=3.8$ ;  $SD=.73$  for ‘motivational intensity’). For further comparisons, the itemized mean scores with their corresponding motivational levels are outlined in tables 5.to 7.

Table 5.  
*Descriptive statistics of ‘Desire to Learn English’ scale*

items	Means	SD	Ratings of Motivational Level
Q3. I have a strong desire to know all aspects of English.	3.96	1.65	Moderate
Q5. If it were up to me, I would spend all of my time learning English.	3.46	1.60	Moderate
Q8. I would like to learn as much English as possible.	4.12	1.66	Moderately high
Q9. I want to learn English so well that it will become natural to me.	4.22	1.62	Moderately high
Q13. I wish I were fluent in English.	4.36	1.64	Moderately high
Q19. I’m losing any desire I ever had to know English.	4.02	1.67	Moderately high
Q21. To be honest, I really have no desire to learn English.	4.40	1.59	Moderately high
Q28. Knowing English isn’t really an important goal in my life.	4.04	1.58	Moderately high
Q29. I sometimes daydream about dropping English.	4.58	1.51	Moderately high
Q30. I haven’t any great wish to learn more than the basics of English.	3.37	1.62	Moderate

70% of the responses to the component of ‘desire to learn English’ clustered around ‘moderately high’ level and only 30% below this level. That is to say, the learners feel they are relatively motivated by their desire to learn English (the reversed item 21 & 19) as much as they can (item 8) to become fluent (item 13) as they feel it is one of their important goals in their life (item 28). Thus, taking into account language learning under the new admission context, almost more than half of the participants showed their positive response to learn English. Compared to the moderately high level found for these items, the lower mean scores of items 30, 5 and 3 show that high school learners are not strongly motivated to go beyond the ‘basics’ of English language yet, nor do they intend to spend much of their time learning this language. This somewhat neutral response to these three items seems to be due to the fact that these respondents prefer to learn English to the extent they require for passing their course, the NEATs or other entry criteria at the moment.

Similar results were found for items constituting ‘attitudes toward L2 learning’ which is another precursor of motivation in Gardner (1985, 2007) and Schumann’s (1998) views. 62.5% (282) of the participants reported positive attitudes towards learning the English language. They said learning English is enjoyable and interesting (reversed items 22 and 27), not a waste of time (reversed item 15). Responses to these items and items 23, 25 and 2 (see Table 6) suggest that the high school learners perceive the idea of developing their English ability in a fairly positive light. Thus, with respects to attitudes towards English learning in

the NEATs-based atmosphere, no negative responses were reported by the students as the remaining items of this component did not cluster around the negative side of the scale. The attitudes, however, did not appear highly positive. These results are compatible with ‘moderate level of attitudes’ found in another study in the same UEEs change context which explored the attitudes held by high school EFL students towards the NEATs’ impact on their affective learning objectives (see ShayesteFar, 2013).

Table 6.  
*Descriptive statistics of ‘Attitudes toward Learning Situation’ scale*

items	Means	SD	Ratings of Motivational Level
Q1. Learning English is really great.	3.74	2.03	Moderate
Q2. I plan to learn as much English as possible.	4.12	1.65	Moderately high
Q10. I really enjoy learning English.	3.86	1.64	Moderate
Q12. English is a very important part of the school programme.	3.84	1.65	Moderate
Q14. I love learning English.	3.90	1.56	Moderate
Q15. Learning English is a waste of time.	4.19	1.61	Moderately high
Q22. I think that learning English is dull.	4.40	1.59	Moderately high
Q23. I would rather spend my time on subjects other than English.	4.17	1.51	Moderately high
Q25. I hate English.	4.49	1.57	Moderately high
Q27. When I leave school, I will give up the study of English because I am not interested in it.	4.22	1.46	Moderately high

Another motivational component measured through the MLES-PV is ‘motivational intensity’ because it is assumed that efforts and persistence are necessary for language learning. Such efforts exerted by the learners and their persistence are crucial for their success in English language achievement (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996; Zhang, 2000). The smallest standard deviation of this component indicates the homogeneity of the responses (see Table 2). Results in Table 7 reveal that our high school EFL learners are neutral in their reactions to the motivational intensity, meaning that 76.7% (345) do not think ‘they really work very hard to learn English’ (item 6:  $\bar{x}$ =3.35; Moderate/neutral). Students were hesitant to agree that they ‘try to understand all the English they see and hear’ (item 11:  $\bar{x}$ =3.98; Moderate/neutral), ‘pay attention to the feedback they receive from their English classes’ (item 26:  $\bar{x}$ =3.42; Moderate/neutral), that they ‘ignore the distractions and pay much attention to their works’ (item 4:  $\bar{x}$ =3.57; Moderate/neutral), that they ‘keep up to date with English by working on it almost every day’ (item:  $\bar{x}$ =3.20; Moderate/neutral), and that they ‘always ask teachers for help in case they have problems understanding something in their English classes’ (item 30). Students’ moderate level of efforts and determination to learn English language show that they are not strongly intent to exert more efforts in their language learning.

Table 7.  
*Descriptive statistics of 'Motivational Intensity' scale*

items	Means	SD	Ratings of Motivational Level
Q4. I keep up to date with English by working on it almost every day.	3.20	1.52	Moderate
Q6. I really work hard to learn English.	3.35	1.53	Moderate
Q7. When I am studying English, I ignore distractions and pay attention to my task.	3.57	1.45	Moderate
Q11. I make a point of trying to understand all the English I see and hear.	3.98	1.57	Moderate
Q16. I put off my English homework as much as possible.	3.88	1.56	Moderate
Q17. I don't pay much attention to the feedback I receive in my English class.	3.89	1.47	Moderate
Q18. I tend to give up and not pay attention when I don't understand my English teacher's explanation of something.	4.01	1.53	Moderately high
Q20. I can't be bothered trying to understand the more complex aspects of English.	4.40	1.40	Moderately high
Q24. I don't bother checking my assignments when I get them back from my English teacher.	4.25	1.53	Moderately high
Q26. When I have a problem understanding something in my English class, I always ask my teacher for help.	3.42	1.50	Moderate

#### 4. Discussion and Conclusion

The MLES-PV was adopted to explore whether the NEATs-based admission programme would positively impact high school students' motivation to learn English. One impetus for evaluating the new programme on the basis of motivational influence came from the national policy documents' and policymakers' heavy emphasis on increasing students' learning motivation in the absence of stress-causing one-shot UEEs. A key reason for this comes from the consistent research findings of the last three decades (e.g., Cheng et al., 2014; Gardner, 1985, 2007; Lucas et al., 2011; Zhang, Dai & Ardasheva, 2020) which demonstrate a significantly negative correlation between anxiety and stress caused by the high-stakes tests and motivational components. Policymakers need to be aware of levels of motivation caused by a programme because motivation has been argued as a significant predictor of language learning and performance (see Gardner, 1985; Hancock, 2001; Liu, 2012; Wu & Lee, 2017; Zeynali et al., 2019).

Hence, regarding '*an increase in learners' motivation will enhance their learning*' as a standard against which the performance of the NEATs programme can be compared, the study yielded noticeable results. In Table 8, x and + represent neutral and positive effects of the NEATs programme from the eyes of the students. While an increase in the level of 'desire to learn' and 'attitudes toward English language learning' shows a congruence between the expected consequence and the NEATs programme performance, the NEATs do not appear to have increased the overall level of motivation to the extent desired by the policies (see standards in Table 8). It is discernible that the new admission programme, after the fourth

year of its implementation, has a neutral impact on some of the motivational and emotional sources. From this perspective, the results are not consistent with Wu and Lee's (2017) findings which revealed students' positive perceptions and lower anxiety towards test benchmarking policies. The occasional convergence or divergence findings reported for test effects on language learning demonstrate that test takers' variables may vary in different research contexts with different emotional factors, showing context-sensitive nature of learners' characteristics and variables.

The higher rate of motivation found for the two motivational components raised above confirms the claim made by Cheng (1999) who argued that wherever there is an examination change, it is likely that students refocus their attention on the examination change and become motivationally interested to learn more. Given this, the present results also corroborate Wu and Lee's (2017) argument that implementation of the test policy influences students' motivation for learning English. Such a learning motivation requires practices, efforts, and persistence and cognitive activities as planning, problem-solving, monitoring and evaluating their learning. The rate of such precursors of the motivational intensity was not high in this study, though.

Table 8.

*Comparisons of the effects of the NEATs programme in terms of motivation to learn*

Intended consequences The NEATs 'Motivational Consequences' in the EFL context of high schools:	Observed consequences Performance of the NEATs programme in terms of 'Motivation':
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Learning Motivation</i> should be high and positively increase.</li> </ul> <p style="text-align: center;">or:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. <i>Desire to learn English</i> should be high and positive.</li> <li>b. <i>Attitudes towards English language learning</i> should be high and positive.</li> <li>c. <i>Motivational Intensity for English language learning</i> should be high and positive.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Learning Motivation</i>: moderate (x)</li> </ul> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. <i>Desire to learn English</i> is moderately high but not 'high' (+).</li> <li>b. <i>Attitudes towards English language learning</i> is moderately high but not 'high' (+).</li> <li>c. <i>Motivational Intensity for English language learning</i> is moderate/neutral (x).</li> </ul>

Learners' neutral reactions to the items that measure their motivational intensity appear inconsistent with Cheng (1999) and Crooks' (1988) statement that the high-stakes tests requirements have their considerable effects on the level and type of the motivational sources. In Iran, while there is a belief that hard work is the key to success in achieving English language, the motivation for undertaking this is not strong as a result of the NEATs requirements. Similar to the EUEEs, the NEATs lack the oral skills or components whose commands are necessary for becoming a successful language learner (Jamshidnejad, 2011). Despite this, the high school learners showed their persistence and determination when 'trying to understand the complex aspects of English' (e.g., item 20), 'pay attention to those teachers' explanations' (reversed item 18), or 'learn as much English' (item 8) that are specifically required for achieving the best NEATs scores possible.

These findings together with less persistence and efforts in learning the skills and components that are not embedded in the NEATs, makes it clear that students' increasing desires and attitudes resemble '*instrumentality*' reasons for English language learning in which students show '*instrumentally-oriented motivation*' (e.g., Nuchnoi, 1997; Cheng, 1997; Yang, 2009; Zhao & Campbell, 1995). These results can confirm the importance of motivational influence of Iranian university entrance examinations on student learning maintained by Kazemi and Sayyadi (2014) who evidently found instrumental motivation among high school EFL learners. An earlier study on the NEATs-oriented classrooms (ShayesteFar, 2013) shows how rate of learning the language components (e.g., vocabulary & grammar) is more dominant compared to the rate of other language skills that are not tested by the NEATs. The study indicates that high school EFL students practice vocabulary and grammar components and only one skill (reading) two times and a half as much as the three other skills (i.e., speaking, listening and writing). It also indicates that efforts and persistence in learning about the reading skill and its strategies as well as test-taking strategies appeared as three times and a half as much as the productive skills. Given these NEATs effects on motivational sources, the present study corroborates the extant literature that English achievement will not be successfully made if actional intensity is absent (Chen, Lee & Stevenson, 1996; Yashima, 2002; Dörnyei, 2005; Yang, 2009).

Overall, the present results indicate that the NEAT-based policy has neutral impacts on the learners' motivation. Learners did not report a high rate of '*motivational intensity for learning language skills and components*' nor of '*total motivational levels*'. This revealed that what is being done in the context of our EFL classes might not work in accordance with the values and consequences intended and set by the reform planners. Therefore, although the strength of the UEEs reform comes along with its underpinning ideas of reform that moves towards a conceptualization of assessment resulting into a policy deliberation and practices, it is still the seriousness of the *test scores and the stakes* that has driven the high school learners to compete for higher scores (instrumental motivation) not their inner drive to learn English language within the present test change context.

Despite the merits of an early evaluation of the change consequence on the students' motivational levels, the study suffers from some limitations, however. The study did not consist of multiple phases or multiple ratings of motivational levels. Participants were solicited for their ratings once at the end of their school year but not on a regular basis nor at the beginning of this year. Lack of the initial rate and level of motivation (for instance, before introducing the change) as a basis for comparison can then be recognized as a potential limitation of the study. Subsequent work exploring the difference between the initial and final status would lead to a more sound judgment about this learning-related variable.

Another problem concerns sampling procedures. Even though a large number of high school EFL learners participated in this study, time, budget, and administrative constraints hindered collecting data from a larger population of Iran. Accordingly, our learning participants were selected only from two provinces where the researchers could have access to the data. More research with larger samples needs to be conducted in future.

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