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As for teachers and students' views concerning the importance of five main aspects of writing paragraphs and essays (i.e. mechanics, content, accuracy, organization, context/appropriateness), the components of "mechanics" and "linguistic accuracy" were rated as the most important, and "appropriateness and communicative context" were rated as least important. This indicates that teachers and students assign little importance to the context of writing. Again, these findings undermine the prospects of having real and successful communicative writing teaching and learning.

In the light of the above findings, the study calls for a comprehensive innovative process of all connected elements, including the format, content, and weight of the various parts of the (TEE). Since this study supports the conclusions derived from different settings that the washback of the (TEE), which involves important decisions for the Tawjihi students, does exist in the writing classroom in Palestine, decision makers are required to employ this exam to create genuine curricular change, and to motivate all participants to focus on communicative skills.

services. There was lack of interest and conviction in staff, particularly in sustaining the process of change over a period of time; lack of careful planning made every thing hard to succeed.

9. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:

This paper started off with a brief description of the context and the use of the (TEE) (Leaving Certificate) in Palestine, presenting a comparative critical analysis of the writing component in this exam for the years 2005 and 2009, with reference to introducing the new textbook – English for Palestine.

The writing component in both (TEE) versions (i.e. 2005 and 2009), as they stand, require improvement. As compared with other components, this component should be given more weight. Moreover, more varied and communicative tasks should be included; it would be fairer if a more balanced weighting system was adopted instead of relying heavily on one type of writing. This may minimize the damage that may be done to those candidates who may feel inhibited by one type of writing.

Then the study explored, through two questionnaires, how often teachers and students do certain activities in their writing classrooms that are tailored either to the demands of the Tawjihi test or to the demands of promoting the students' writing skill. The overall results showed that teachers and students' activities are almost evenly divided over promoting the writing skills and passing the Tawjihi writing test. But a closer look at the results obtained for each single item within each dimension reveals that there is no harmony, which shows the extent to which teachers and students are confused and uncertain about the actual deep objectives of what they are actually doing in their writing classrooms.

In fact, this study showed that the (TEE) has a negative impact on the teachers and students' classroom practices; their activities were mostly geared towards pushing the students towards passing the exam rather than promoting their writing skills. This result was confirmed by the teachers' comments in the semi-structured interviews. Besides, most students reported skipping the writing sections in the textbook that are deemed to be not important for the Tawjihi writing test, based on their experience and revision of previous years' test papers. Due to the current content and format of the (TEE), teachers and students do not attach to this skill much importance in their classroom practices.

Clearly, little harmony of the above elements has been achieved to bring about an effective teaching and learning of English in Palestine. Although the new English language textbook is designed as an integrative course emphasizing all language skills and areas equally, the use made by individual teachers of the new textbooks seems to be much of a personal approach and choice and largely unpredictable by the innovators. Overall the practical usage is far from what the innovators believed to be the case; the materials are certainly treated by the same criteria and knowledge teachers used to follow with the old textbooks.

One can infer that the Palestinian Ministry of Education has relied heavily on the assumption that the textbook is the key to what happens in the classroom, or it is the device through which the vast range of change in knowledge, values, skills and roles which the school offers to its pupils, is organized, taught and eventually evaluated. They assumed that teachers and learners are textbook-dependent and so any change in this textbook means an automatic and immediate change in all participants.

Priority should have been given to training teachers because even when the textbook is clearly defined and priorities are agreed upon, the range of work and the range of pupils present a formidable challenge to the knowledge of an individual teacher. In Chapman and Snyder's (2000: 457) analysis, the failure of several endeavors to employ tests with high-stakes decisions to enhance classroom teaching and student achievement is attributed to a deficiency in comprehending "the intermediate conditions that had to be met for changes in test content, format, or use to have the desired impact on teachers' classroom practice". In Chapman and Snyder's model of the links between testing and classroom practice, the issue of getting teachers to realize the changes needed for boosting students' performance was identified as the most difficult condition to be fulfilled.

Even the able teacher's teaching techniques may collapse under the pressure of a fossilized system of testing. Teachers may resort to teaching for the test to guarantee their students' success in such very important Tawjihi exam. The innovation has not gone hand-in-hand with the other five connected areas mentioned above. From the teachers' interviews, the researcher felt that there was a sense of low self-esteem and inadequacy in staff, and a lack of relevant skills in analyzing objectives, dealing with new ideas; failure of authorities and supervisors to provide advisory and specialist consultancy

believed the test would affect their end-of-year course grades, and 62% reported that the test would influence “their knowledge of Arabic and future success in their studies” (ibid. p. 305). But 65% of the students felt that it was not important for them to do well in this test (ibid.), and 64% of them said that the ASL test “does not reflect their true knowledge of Arabic” (ibid: 306).

On the other hand, 54% of the students preparing for the high-stakes EFL test reported “intense preparation for the exam” (ibid: 308). When the new EFL test was introduced, 97% of the students showed awareness of the changes in the test (ibid: 309). Besides, 96% of the students felt rather concerned about the test (ibid: 310). 86% of the students thought the EFL test could affect their total matriculation result significantly (ibid.), and 70% of the students felt that their success in future studies could be inspired by the results of the EFL exam (ibid.). Interestingly, the students’ opinions echoed the teachers’ views of the significance of this high-stakes exam; 82% of the students rated the exam as very important; and 84% of them attached great importance to do well in the oral exam (ibid: 311).

When Shohamy et al. (1996) asked the students whether and how the EFL test advanced their learning, 92% of the students, regarding the high-stakes EFL test, reported that the purpose of the test was to promote learning, and 68% of them thought that the test endorsed learning (from a large to a very large degree). But when asked about the impact of the EFL test on their own language learning, 46% of them felt that it had little or no impact, and 34% of them thought it affected their command of English considerably (p. 312). However, when Shohamy et al. (1996: 306) posed the same question to students with regard to the low-stakes ASL test on learning, teachers and students alike showed negative feelings about the test and underestimated its significance and necessity in all program levels.

The present study reveals that little change has taken place over the design and the essence of the (TEE) for many years. A real fulfillment of the objectives of the new textbooks requires a dramatic change in the teachers and learners’ roles in Palestine. The new textbook suggests a dramatic change in areas which should be related to something broader and more comprehensive than a textbook. It suggests a big shift in at least five major areas: (1) the teacher’s role and teaching techniques. (2) the learner’s role and views on learning. (3) curriculum content and teaching materials. (5) views on evaluation and testing practices .

an IELTS preparation component). Findings indicated no clear advantage for focused test preparation.

The fact that the scores of the two IELTS tests were found to improve following instruction in academic writing and that there was no significant difference in terms of score gains between those studying on pre-sessional EAP programmes and those engaging in dedicated IELTS preparation courses suggests that course providers did not succeed, through dedicated test preparation practices, to exploit test design characteristics to boost scores. In short, the study reported little apparent benefit to the learners when concentrating on the test requirements at the expense of broader academic writing skills.

It seems that the negative effects of the GSC have become entrenched in the Tawjihi preparation scheme. In my view, what can eliminate such negative effects is only a comprehensive process that creates real innovation over all connected elements, including not only the textbook per se, but also the teacher's practices as well as the essence of the Tawjihi exam itself. If the new (TEE) does not reflect the new textbook designers' expectations and intentions, and remains in its traditional format, no one, then, should blame teachers and students for keeping their old teaching and learning practices. Not only that, this mismatch creates more confusion and difficulties for all parties concerned.

The Tawjihi, as a high-stakes test for Palestinian students, can be used as a lever for effecting change in what happens in the writing classroom. Shohamy et al (1996) conducted a study on a group of 62 7th-9th grade Israeli students getting ready to take the low-stakes examination of Arabic as a second language (ASL) and on another group of 50 students preparing for the high-stakes examination of English as a foreign language (EFL). The study employed student questionnaires embracing both Likert-scale items and open-ended items.

On the one hand, 86% of the students preparing for the low-stakes ASL test reported no special activities dedicated to test preparation prior to the exam; 72% revealed that no class time at all was devoted to the test; 63% of the students said that they were not aware of the test's existence, and 90% of them admitted that they had no idea of the material covered by the test. These findings corresponded with data obtained from their teachers who admitted of not informing their classes about the ASL test. However, 52% of the students

the exam, without worrying so much about the communicative nature of the new textbook or about creativity and fluency in their writing. Of course, this undermines the prospects of having real and successful writing teaching and learning.

When teachers and students' were asked for their views concerning the importance of five main aspects of writing paragraphs and essays (i.e. mechanics, content, accuracy, organization, context\ appropriateness), the components of "mechanics" and "linguistic accuracy" were rated as the most important, and "appropriateness and communicative context" were rated as least important. Again, this indicates that teachers and students assign little importance to the communicative context of writing.

According to the obtained results, preparation for the Tawjihi exam receives so much emphasis to the extent that students and teachers reduce or even eliminate instruction in areas other than those to be tested. It seems that the Tawjihi exam has become a test-directed course in which students are coached on how to score high in this exam.

Unfortunately, test-oriented courses have not proved to be effective. For example, in an attempt to examine the kinds of washback stemming from the effects of a test on the language learners themselves, Green (2007) examined whether test-directed courses (or dedicated test preparation classes), as compared with courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and courses that include both strands, granted learners an advantage in improving their writing test scores. Following instruction on a measure of academic writing skills—the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) academic writing test — score gains were compared across the three language courses (i.e. those with a test preparation focus, those designed to introduce students to academic writing in the university setting and those combining the two); all designed for international students preparing for entry to UK universities. In addition to IELTS academic writing test scores, data relating to differences in participants and practices across courses were collected through supplementary questionnaire and test instruments. An artificial intelligence approach to the data analysis using a neural network approach was employed.

Green's study has cast doubt on the power of dedicated test preparation courses to deliver the anticipated yields. Learners on courses that included IELTS preparation (Type 1 and Type 3) did not improve their scores to any greater extent than those on Type 2 pre-sessional EAP courses (with or without

my students pass the (TEE). So we have no time to spend on highlighting certain issues of writing unless they come in the Tawjihi Exam. For example I always train my students on how to organize a formal letter because the (TEE) normally has a similar question.”

Clearly this teacher’s comment shows that the Tawjihi obsession undermines the possibility of using such a test as an effective teaching and learning tool. It seems that teachers in the field usually teach for the test, but as Heyneman (1987: 260) has rightly suggested, “national officials have three choices with regard to this ‘backwash effect’: they can fight it, ignore it, or use it”. This implies that it is the decision makers’ responsibility to minimize the negative effects and to maximize the positive ones.

In my view, this implies that washback is usually there, but it is the policy makers’ task to minimize the negative effects and maximize the positive ones. The Tawjihi exam should be carefully designed so that students, teachers and schools are not overwhelmed by preparing for the test itself, instead of taking the test as a lever for learning.

8. DISCUSSION:

Although the overall results showed that the writing classroom activities performed by Tawjihi English language teachers and students are almost evenly divided between promoting the writing skill and increasing the chances of passing the Tawjihi writing exam, close examination of each single item revealed that the overwhelming majority of teachers give their students writing tasks that resemble the Tawjihi writing test items and writing tasks borrowed from previous Tawjihi writing tests. This finding was confirmed by the teachers’ comments in the semi-structured interviews. By the same token, most students reported skipping the writing sections in the textbook that are deemed to be not important for the Tawjihi writing test. The Tawjihi writing test, as has been experienced and observed by teachers and students throughout the previous years, seems to give a hint to the students as to what sections of their textbook to focus on or skip.

It becomes obvious that Tawjihi English language teachers in Palestine teach to the (TEE) or teach students to be tested; they tend to make use of the content and the format of previously used versions of the (TEE). Putting the quantitative and qualitative findings together shows that teachers and students alike rely heavily on ready-made rubrics, letters, and sample essays to pass

Table (7)

Frequencies of teachers and students' response 'I don't know'

Items			# out of 49	%	# out of 439	%
Mechanics	1	Make handwriting neat	0	0.00	31	7.06
	2	Get capitals and punctuation right	0	0.00	52	11.85
	3	Keep answer sheet clean and tidy	0	0.00	34	7.74
Content	1	State the topic sentence of the paragraph	0	0.00	60	13.67
	2	Give all supporting details	2	4.08	78	17.77
	3	Use logical and persuasive evidence to support my position	4	8.16	86	19.59
Accuracy	1	Write grammatically correct structures/ sentences	0	0.00	56	12.76
	2	Use vocabulary meaningfully	0	0.00	101	23.01
	3	Use expressions as used by native speakers	6	12.24	78	17.77
	4	Use only English, not Arabic	3	6.12	41	9.34
Organization	1	Have an opening and an ending sentence in my paragraph	2	4.08	81	18.45
	2	Have an introduction and a conclusion in my essay	0	0.00	55	12.53
	3	Use link words to make the writing cohesive	0	0.00	60	13.67
	4	Devise outlines before I write	7	14.29	79	18.00
	5	Vary the sentences (i.e simple, compound and complex)	4	8.16	66	15.03
Context/ Appropriateness	1	Consider the supposed purpose	2	4.08	86	19.59
	2	Consider the supposed audience	2	4.08	50	11.39
	3	Consider the supposed writer	7	14.29	38	8.66
	4	Write a lively and engaging composition	5	10.20	31	7.06
	5	Write in appropriate language that shows respect for my readers	2	4.08	52	11.85

When teachers were asked in the semi-structured interview to mention the aspects of writing that need to be highlighted, most of them avoided answering this question saying that little teaching of writing actually takes place. Only one teacher stressed the importance of training students on how to write a formal letter saying: «Teachers and students work under the tremendous pressure of the Tawjihi exam. What concerns me most is helping

	No.		Teachers			Students		
			%	std	mean	%	std	mean
Context Appropriateness	5	Write in appropriate language that shows respect for my readers	77.96	0.77	3.90	77.22	1.39	3.86

*The greatest value is 5

As shown in Table (6) below, it is true that teachers rated all five components as important, but a closer examination of the figures reveals that teachers view the components of “mechanics” (mean 4.37) and “linguistic accuracy” (mean 4.16) as the most important (and appropriateness and communicative context as least important (mean 3.79). This indicates that teachers assign little importance to the communicative context of writing.

The fact that the component of “communicative context and appropriateness” showed the highest standard deviation (0.64) highlights some teachers’ uncertainty about the role of the communicative context and appropriateness. This goes in line with the results obtained in a similar study conducted by Qi (2007) on Chinese teachers.

Table (6)

Teachers and students’ views on writing: means, standard deviations, and percentages

Writing Attribute	Teachers’ views				Students’ views			
	mean	std	%		mean	std	%	
Mechanics	4.37	0.36	87.35	important	4.08	1.00	81.50	important
Content	4.20	0.48	83.95	important	3.54	1.06	70.71	important
Accuracy	4.16	0.43	83.16	important	3.17	0.81	63.44	important
Organization	4.11	0.52	82.12	important	3.62	1.04	72.46	important
Context\ Appropriateness	3.79	0.64	75.84	important	3.59	1.00	71.73	important

Students’ views concerning all writing attributes gave high standard deviation values, which not only highlights their uncertainty of these writing attributes, but, in my analysis, proves their lack of knowledge of the these basic writing conventions. This goes in line with the present study findings which indicate that little teaching and learning actually takes place in the English writing classes of the Tawjihi.

More evidence for this interpretation comes from the counting of the choice of the ‘I don’t know’ option, in which the component of communicative context and appropriateness received more ‘I don’t know’ responses in comparison with the other components (Table 7).

Table (5)

Teachers and students' views on writing: means, standard deviations, and percentages

	No.		Teachers			Students		
			%	std	mean	%	std	mean
Mechanics	1	Make handwriting neat	85.71	0.46	4.29	84.05	1.23	4.20
	2	Get capitals and punctuation right	89.39	0.50	4.47	76.81	1.22	3.84
	3	Keep answer sheet clean and tidy	86.94	0.48	4.35	83.64	1.17	4.18
Content	1	State the topic sentence of the paragraph	91.84	0.50	4.59	76.36	1.28	3.82
	2	Give all supporting details	83.27	0.69	4.16	66.88	1.34	3.34
	3	Use logical & persuasive evidence to support my position	76.73	0.85	3.84	68.88	1.23	3.44
Accuracy	1	Write grammatically correct structures/ sentences	85.31	0.76	4.27	70.66	1.28	3.53
	2	Use vocabulary meaningfully	87.76	0.49	4.39	72.44	1.24	3.62
	3	Use expressions as used by native speakers	71.84	0.96	3.59	55.13	1.24	2.76
	4	Use only English, not Arabic	87.76	0.61	4.39	55.54	1.41	2.78
Organization	1	Have an opening and an ending sentence in my paragraph	84.90	0.72	4.24	79.13	1.32	3.96
	2	Have an introduction and a conclusion in my essay	89.80	0.51	4.49	73.26	1.30	3.66
	3	Use link words to make the writing cohesive	90.20	0.51	4.51	75.40	1.31	3.77
	4	Devise outlines before I write	73.47	1.11	3.67	67.06	1.37	3.35
	5	Vary sentences (i.e simple, compound and complex)	72.24	1.11	3.61	67.43	1.44	3.37
Context Appropriateness	1	Consider the supposed purpose	81.63	0.73	4.08	73.58	1.35	3.68
	2	Consider the supposed audience	70.20	1.04	3.51	64.46	1.39	3.22
	3	Consider the supposed writer	72.65	0.95	3.63	69.98	1.31	3.50
	4	Write a lively and engaging composition	76.73	0.87	3.84	73.39	1.40	3.67

- **T2:** In my view, the (TEE) has a negative impact on the students' productive skills. Because everyone wants to pass the exam and because reading and grammar get the highest weighting in the exam, everyone focuses on grammar and reading and disregards speaking and writing.

- **T3:** The (TEE) writers should be aware that if speaking and listening task types were included in their test, and if writing tasks were weighted more, I would definitely use similar tasks with my Tawjihi students.

These comments, which are taken from the semi-structured interviews, show that even teachers expressed similar views which, in my view, seem to be more realistic and frank. This may be attributed to the relaxed atmosphere prevalent in each interview which enabled teachers to ask for clarifications before giving their answers.

The weight given to each skill in the Tawjihi Exam reflects the importance the test writers give to each skill. The (TEE) is comprised of two papers. The first paper has two sections: reading 50% & vocabulary 25%, and the second paper with three sections: language (35%), literature (20%) and writing (20%). Clearly, speaking and listening skills are excluded which clearly explains why teachers and students ignore both skills in the teaching and learning practices. Because the weight allocated for writing skill represents only 13% of the total grade, many teachers and students tend to ignore this skill in favour of focusing on the more weighted skills such as reading and grammar. That's why Ts & Ss tend to overwhelmingly focus on grammar, vocabulary, reading in the classroom, and they tend to disregard other language skills although the new textbook emphasizes all language skills and areas equally.

- **Section 3**

How important do you find the following aspects of writing paragraphs and essays for developing the writing skill?

The second section of both questionnaires was intended to investigate teachers and students' views on the importance of five main aspects of writing paragraphs and essays (i.e. mechanics, content, accuracy, organization, context/appropriateness). In order to measure each aspect, several parameters were devised (see table 4 below). In the light of the emphasis put by the new textbook designers on the communicative aspects of writing, our aim was to examine the extent of importance and thus commitment that teachers and students have towards fulfilling those designers' intended aims.

Table(4)**Results of students' activities in the writing class: means, standard deviations, and percentages**

	No.	Activity	degree	%	St.dv.	mean
Work to be tested	1	Practice writing tasks that resemble the Tawjihi writing test	moderate	53.62	1.11	2.68
	2	Practice writing tasks taken from previous Tawjihi writing tests	moderate	59.68	1.22	2.98
	3	Try to memorize compositions for the Tawjihi writing test	low	43.92	1.39	2.20
	4	Skip writing sections in the textbook that are not important for the Tawjihi writing test	moderate	62.60	1.59	3.13
Total degree			moderate	54.95	0.82	2.75
Work to develop a skill	5	Practice writing after class as homework	moderate	51.30	1.41	2.56
	6	Try to learn by heart expressions useful for writing activities	moderate	60.27	1.49	3.01
	7	Write on topics related to my experience	moderate	52.03	1.36	2.60
	8	Write daily in journals	low	48.79	1.67	2.44
Total degree			moderate	53.10	0.93	2.65

The greatest value is 5

Interpretation scale: Above 70% means high use; 50% - 69% means moderate use; Below 50% means low use

Notice that most students (62.6%) skip the writing sections in the textbook that are deemed to be not important for the Tawjihi writing test. If this is the most common practice in a writing classroom, then it becomes obvious that students at this stage of their academic life are obsessed with working for the test. Even in their attempt to develop their writing skill, 60.27% resort to learning expressions by heart. It seems that students' are guided here by the Tawjihi writing test as to what sections to focus on or skip. They tend to prioritize their study according to the writing test.

Consider, for example, the following quotations from the teachers' interviews:

- T1: I believe that (TEE) has one positive impact in that teachers and students work a lot on reading, vocabulary and grammar, but, as many other colleagues do, I never teach speaking or writing or listening while preparing my students for this exam. This exam has a negative impact in that many teachers and students disregard these skills and focus on memorization.

them also give students writing tasks taken from previous Tawjihi writing tests. *This result goes in harmony with the opinions expressed in the semi-structured interview by three English language teachers when asked about the challenges they faced in teaching writing:*

- **T1:** Time–constraint is the main challenge. I always try to finish the material required for the Tawjihi Exam. According to the organization of the textbook, each unit has a writing section. So I’m supposed to give one writing lesson depending on the pace of our progress in completing each unit, ... perhaps once a week. But writing doesn’t receive as much attention as reading and grammar in this exam, and so I ask my students to write 10 compositions at home following the number of units in the textbook. Many teachers ask students to do this writing at home because students are not competent in writing from the early stage. We find ourselves obliged to finish the textbook to prepare our students for the Tawjihi. Our success as teachers is measured by the students’ success ratio in the Tawjihi. I myself would feel unsuccessful if my students do not score high in the (TEE). So I do whatever it takes to achieve that.

- **T2:** To be frank, writing is not a targeted skill at the secondary stage and indeed not in the Tawjihi year. This can be attributed to its low weight in the (TEE) and to the teacher’s grammar-oriented teaching methods.

- **T3:** It is true that we are required to ask students to write 10 compositions following each unit. We rarely do that in the classroom and we ask students to do that on their own at home. As an alternative, we predict few topics and we provide our students with compositions based on such predictions to memorize for the exam.

This lends support to Swain’s (1985: 43) assertion that “it has frequently been noted that teachers will teach to a test: that is, if they know the content of a test and/or the format of a test, they will teach their students accordingly”. According to the results shown in table (3) above, (68.57%) of the teachers reported giving their students compositions as samples to memorize for the Tawjihi writing test. Thomas (2004) goes even further in saying that “the rubrics and sample essays provided by the test designers become the curriculum.”

Table(3)

Results of teachers' activities in the writing class: means, standard deviations, and percentages

	No.	Activity	degree	percentage	St.dv.	Mean
Work to be tested	1	Give students writing tasks that resemble the Tawjihi writing test	High	90.61	0.58	4.53
	2	Give students writing tasks taken from previous Tawjihi writing tests	High	79.59	0.85	3.98
	3	Give students compositions as samples to memorize for the Tawjihi writing test	Moderate	68.57	1.50	3.43
	4	Skip writing sections in the textbook that are not important for the Tawjihi writing test	Low	47.35	1.18	2.37
Total degree			High	71.40	0.73	3.57
Work to develop a skill	5	Ask students to practice writing after class as homework	High	83.27	0.69	4.16
	6	Provide students with expressions useful for writing tasks	High	85.31	0.73	4.27
	7	Suggest topics related to students' experience to write on	High	80.82	0.87	4.04
	8	Ask students to write daily in journals	Low	40.82	0.91	2.04
Total degree			High	72.55	0.52	3.63

The greatest value is 5

Interpretation scale: Above 70% means high use; 50% - 69% means moderate use; Below 50% means low use

On the face of it, the overall figures show that teachers are slightly more concerned with helping their students to develop a skill (72.55%) than with preparing them for the Tawjihi test (71.40%). (85.31%) of the teachers report that they provide students with expressions useful for writing tasks, and ask them to practice writing after class as homework (83.27%).

But close examination of the results presented in table (3) above shows that the overwhelming majority of teachers (90.61%) give their students writing tasks that resemble the Tawjihi writing test items and (79.9%) of

This result goes in line with the opinions of three teachers who stressed in the semi-structured interview that they always try to strike a balance between enabling their students to express themselves communicatively and helping them to pass the (TEE). But I quote what one teacher said here: “I teach writing because, unlike listening and speaking, it receives, at least, some attention in the Tawjihi. I believe that test writers should give writing more weight as reading because writing is also an important skill.” Another Tawjihi teacher said the following: *“in the English language classrooms, apart from grammar, reading is the only extensively taught skill, whereas the skills of writing, listening and speaking are not emphasized at all.”*

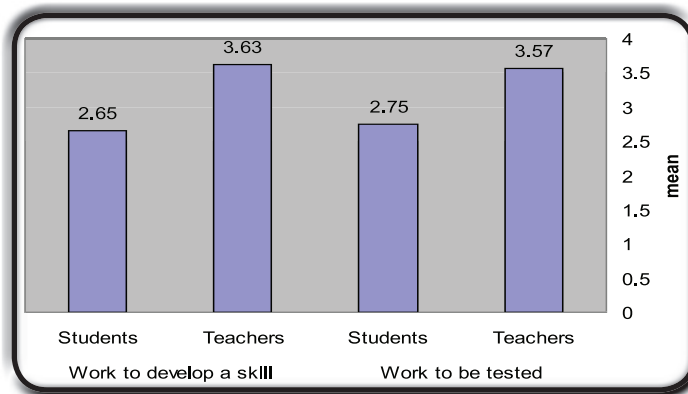


Figure (1)

Overall means of the total degree between students and teachers' activities

The overall results indicate that teachers and students' activities are almost evenly divided over their attempts to combine promoting the writing skill with increasing students' chances to pass the Tawjihi writing test. Close examination of the results (table 3 below) shows that students are more concerned with passing the Tawjihi test. Of course this can be attributed to the detrimental effect of this test on shaping these students' future life. But a closer look at the results obtained for each single item within each dimension (tables 2 & 3) reveals that there is no harmony in the responses within each band, which shows the extent to which teachers and students are confused and uncertain about the actual deep objectives of what they are actually doing in their writing classrooms.

statistical analyses of the data (means and standard deviations), a non-paired t-test was performed to compare the means of the two groups, and then a one-way ANOVA was used to compare the means of the groups that are greater than two.

- **Section 1:**

Examining the Effect of the Variables of School Location, Class Size, Qualification, Experience, Age, and Gender

The statistical analyses showed that there are no statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level in the activities used by students in their writing classrooms with respect to the school location (p-value 0.98), class size (0.21), or gender (0.38) variables. Similarly, the statistical analyses revealed that there are no statistically significant differences at the 0.05 level in the activities used by teachers in their writing classrooms in relation to the variables of qualification (p-value 0.148), experience (0.25), age (0.34), or gender (0.068). (For more details, see Appendices V & VI).

- **Section 2:**

How often do you do the following in your writing classes?

To answer this question, the means, standard deviations and percentages are calculated for the items. The table below shows the overall degrees (out of 5) for each item with respect to Likert scale

(1= Never, 2=Occasionally, 3= Sometimes, 4= Often, 5= Always).

When Tawjihi English language teachers and students were asked about the frequency of doing activities that either prepare the students for the Tawjihi test or attempt to develop their overall writing skill, the obtained results were as follows:

Table (2)

Results of teachers' (Ts) and students' (Ss) activities in the writing class

	mean		Std.		percentage		degree	
	Ss	Ts	Ss	Ts	Ss	Ts	Ss	Ts
Work to be tested	2.75	3.57	0.82	0.73	54.95	71.40	moderate	high
Work to develop a skill	2.65	3.63	0.93	0.52	53.10	72.55	moderate	high

Interpretation scale: Above 70% means high use; 50% - 69% means moderate use; Below 50% means low use

of the (TEE). *Controlled writing tasks should be given more weight and attention in the (TEE) for the following reasons:*

- A. They offer a more valid writing test in terms of comparability and marking. According to Ali (1980), the immediate objective of the writing section in the prescribed English books for the secondary stage in Palestine is to enable the students to produce short and controlled pieces of writing.
- B. According to my experience, as a former teacher of English and a marker of the (TEE) in Palestine, controlled writing tasks are, to a great extent, manageable by the greatest proportion of candidates who may not be able to perform well on other writing tasks. Having more varied tasks, to a great extent, minimizes the damage that may be done to some candidates from one writing task. Carroll et. al. (1985: 33) recommend offering a variety of writing tasks in public examinations on the assumption that no single writing task should have such importance. In their analysis, it would be better if students were provided with two controlled writing tasks rather than one because giving more than two topics makes the assessment difficult and the students' compositions may become rather repetitive. The letter writing section has become a permanent or even a fossilized part of the (TEE). It has been repeatedly used for many years. Thus, it would be better if differing writing tasks were offered each year. For example, students can be asked to do many other writing tasks such as, formal or informal letters, filling out forms, describing a certain picture or graph, writing postcards and sales notices ... etc.
- C. Since controlled writing is a prerequisite step for guided writing and thus free writing, giving it some weight can have a positive washback in the classroom as it encourages learners and teachers to devote sufficient time and pay more attention to it before prematurely moving to guided and free writing. In fact, controlled writing provides a good chance for weak candidates to display their simple writing ability.
- D. When students are asked to write full dialogues or paragraphs under definite guide-lines, they are expected to produce more or less the same piece of writing, which makes scoring more objective and reliable.

7. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS:

For the purpose of conducting statistical analyses, the statistical package of social sciences (SPSS) was employed. In addition to the descriptive

the (TEE) do not pay attention to their teachers' explanation of this as their concern is to learn directly about what this examination focuses on.

Generally speaking, the writing tasks of the (TEE) are clearly defined, and examinees are provided with authentic context, reasonable purpose for their task, definite situation, and intended audience, but relying heavily in this exam on guided writing or free writing tasks is in need of tremendous improvement. ***The following guide-lines might be useful for the construction of a possible future alternative in the (TEE):***

- A.** The test writer should avoid problematic areas that require specific knowledge, background, or interest. In Sanders' view (1980- cited in Ramírez, 2006: 79), the topics must be carefully chosen to meet the student's interests (i.e. holidays, letters, folk tales, writing news articles and headlines, writing a newspaper ad, identifying the type of pet or object, describing physical characteristics, writing a letter to give advice, giving a solution to a problem ... etc.).
- B.** The guided writing section should be given less weighting in order to minimize any possible negative consequences that may be reflected in the reliability of scoring and thus in the candidates' results.
- C.** A selection of topics should not be provided for it distracts candidates' thoughts and wastes a lot of time. In my view, it would be fairer to ask students at the Tawjihi level to do two short guided and free compositions plus two controlled writing tasks in which students' freedom of expression is restricted in their written work to increase the reliability of the scoring. For example, students can be given a short reading text to write about, using given notes, a similar paragraph, or they can be asked to rewrite a given story in a different way, or to finish incomplete sentences in different ways, or to write a sentence preceding a given statement, or to fill out a paragraph with blanks. Heaton (1982) and Underhill (1982) have both emphasized the usefulness of controlled writing test as it offers a reliable way of measuring a number of identifiable skills at a time, and it spares examinees wasting a lot of time since they have been given a clearly defined task.

As a result of the above considerations and others, it seems that the textbook change did not spell any significant change in the writing examination

Apart from all these considerations, the fact that the (TEE) focused on guided composition at the expense of controlled writing may have negative washback effects in the classroom. Broughton et al (1980:118 - 119) propose some sort of gradation in the teaching and learning of writing, saying that:

“It seems convenient, then, to structure a writing course through three main stages. These will be: (i) controlled writing, (ii) guided writing, and (iii) free writing. These terms have been fairly loosely used in the past, and the first two are often used as if they are interchangeable. However, it seems sensible to distinguish between writing exercises in which the final product is linguistically determined by the teacher or materials writer and exercises in which the final content is determined.

Thus a paragraph with blanks to be filled may be a legitimate early part of a writing programme, and can be considered a controlled composition, as is one in which, for example, picture prompts, or memory of a model presented by the teacher, leads to the students reproducing more or less exactly the same final product as each other. On the other hand, a composition in which the teacher provides the situation and helps the class to prepare the written work, either through written or oral assistance, is a guided composition, because each piece of work is different in the language used, even if the content and organization are basically the same throughout the class. A free composition usually means a composition in which only the title is provided and everything else is done by the student it is useful in discussing the development of writing skills to think in terms of these three levels. Generally, the controlled stage concerns itself with the production of accurate language in context, the guided stage with the organization of material which is given, and the free stage with the production by the student of both content and language.”

As far as the writing component of (TEE) is concerned, the two guided writing sections would drive teachers and students in the following years to focus on this type at the expense of controlled and free writing. Guided writing is important for promoting accuracy, and free writing is essential for developing creativity. Heaton (1988: 137) expresses concerns about the terrible washback effect of examinations involving composition writing in that teachers usually predict the requirements of public exams (such as TEE) and prematurely proceed from controlled composition to free composition before the basic writing skills have been mastered. Moreover, even when some teachers try to focus on guided composition, learners who are mainly interested in passing

the four options in order to choose the two topics they prefer to write about. In Heaton's (1988: 138) analysis, testees may waste a lot of time in deciding which writing task to choose if several topics are provided. Moreover, Alderson (1986) points out that providing candidates with a choice of composition items (like the above items) makes it very difficult for the marker to evaluate and compare their productions.

Secondly, the subjects of some of these topics are beyond the scope of many students of this age. For example, topic (1) of (TEE) 2005 requires, to a great extent, considerable geological, astronomical interest and background. Since the (TEE) is administered to students coming from diverse streams (i.e. scientific, literary, commercial, vocational, industrial, ...etc.), candidates with such background will have an unfair advantage over those without it. Similarly, in topic (2) of (TEE) 2005, students with literary background, who may not know a lot about disease in animals may not be able to write about such a topic even in their mother tongue. Similarly, in dealing with topic (2) of (TEE) 2009, students may find it difficult to write on the subject of "recycling" even in their mother tongue let alone in a foreign language. This is a very scientific subject that requires solid background knowledge of environmental issues and even of chemistry. Alderson (1986) indicates that such topics may give some advantage to some candidates over others because they, to some extent, involve specific background or cultural knowledge.

But when the researcher referred to the Tawjihi new textbook, what is being involved is that the examiners wanted students to reproduce in writing what they had studied in the reading component of the syllabus. In principle, this way of controlled writing in which students are given a reading text and then required to write a similar paragraph could be a useful way of promoting students' writing skills, and in Heaton's (1988: 154) view, it increases the reliability of scoring because it regulates students' freedom of expression. But this is not really the case when teachers recommend several topics to their students based on the reading selections, and students learn them by heart. This pattern of writing tasks could not only hinder students' creativity but also could give an unfair advantage for students who luckily learnt by heart the given reading selection over those who did not. In my view, it would be fairer if test takers were given an unfamiliar reading selection, and then asked to reproduce a similar one in their own words.

Table (1)
Reliability of Teacher and Student’s Questionnaire

Section		Cronbach alpha	
		Ss	Ts
How often do you do the following in your writing classes?		0.632	0.581
How important do you find the following for developing your writing skill?	Mechanics	0.774	0.616
	Content	0.770	0.460
	Accuracy	0.834	0.384
	Organization	0.828	0.598
	Context/Appropriateness	0.787	0.772
	Overall reliability	0.898	0.836

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were held with five English language teachers. The interviews questions were designed and employed as a supplement to the questionnaire to get an in-depth understanding of teachers’ teaching practices in the writing classroom, and their opinions about the impact of the (TEE) on the learning-cum-teaching process.

Population of the Study and Sample: The questionnaires were distributed among two samples taken from the population of the study which consisted of (3221) - all Tawjihi students (2237 literary stream, 790 scientific stream, 156 commercial stream, and 38 industrial stream) and 49 English language teachers at the governmental schools of Bethlehem Governorate. The first sample covered 439 Tawjihi students from eleven secondary schools chosen according to location and gender (representing 13.6% of the total population number), and the other sample covered 49 English language teachers (representing the whole population), as shown in Appendix (III).

Limitation: The fact that the sample of the present study is taken from one governorate represents the main limitation of this study.

6. CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE COMPOSITION SECTION IN (TEE) 2005 AND (TEE) 2009:

At first glance, both writing examinations (Appendix IV) seem to be relatively similar in terms of format and organization. When taking the two writing examinations, test takers have to carry out two irrelevant actions in order to get access to the intended task. **Firstly**, they have to read and analyze

nothing has been done to improve this exam following that textbook change, as will be seen later in comparing an old exam version with a new one. It seems that “to innovate through testing”, as Wall and Horák (2006: 3) put it, has no place in Palestine. Nothing has been done to create a match between the new textbook and the (TEE). As stated earlier, the purpose of this study is to examine the potential impact of the (TEE) on the teaching-cum-learning practices in the writing classroom as well as the implications for language education in general, and for language testing, in particular.

5. METHODOLOGY:

Instruments and Data Collection: This paper employs a combination of qualitative and quantitative data (i.e. a multi-method approach). The first will be a critical analysis of the writing Tawjihi test items in the light of the new textbook aims and design. The second will be semi-structured interviews with EFL teachers.

The third approach will be based on two structured questionnaires investigating the English language teachers and students’ practices in the writing classrooms following the textbook change to cross-check the qualitative and the quantitative findings (see Appendices I & II). Each questionnaire consisted of three sections; the first covers subject information. The second section which was made up of eight items attempted to examine whether teachers and students’ practices in the writing classrooms were focused on developing a language skill or on achieving higher scores in the Tawjihi writing test. The third section which investigates teachers and students’ views on writing consisted of 20 items, grouped into five components. The first component, ‘mechanics’ includes three items pertaining to handwriting, punctuation, and neatness of paper. The second ‘content’ embraces three items relating to topic sentence, supporting details, and giving evidence. The third component ‘accuracy’ includes four items focusing on using correct structure, vocabulary, and the target language. In order to guarantee that students understand the items, Arabic translation was provided beside each item. Before starting filling out the questionnaire, the English teacher explained to the class the procedure, and stayed in the classroom to answer students’ queries.

The two questionnaires were presented to a panel of experts to eliminate any threats to their validity. To ensure the reliability of both questionnaires, Cronbach alpha test was used as shown in table (2).

attention (59.6%) and the communicative context received the least proportion of attention (6.8%). So contrary to the washback intended by policy-makers and test-constructors, the study showed that writing with a communicative purpose did not take place in schools; both teachers and students focused on the testing requirements and the markers' predicted preferences.

The above studies, which represent diverse contexts of washback from tests on teachers and learners' practices in their classrooms, support, in principle, the existence of washback, but they do not offer absolute evidence regarding its nature (i.e. whether it is positive or negative). As Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996: 281) put it: "much has been written about the influence of testing on teaching. To date, however, little empirical evidence is available to support the assertions of either positive or negative washback". Andrews (1994a: 44) goes even further to cast doubts on the existence of washback saying that "although a great deal has been said and written about washback, there is in fact relatively little empirical evidence for its existence".

Of course, one cannot do justice in a few paragraphs to the accumulated literature on the washback effects of exams on the teaching and learning practices. As far as this study is concerned, observation from the studies surveyed above give empirical support for the existence of tests' washback as a phenomenon in the given environments, and shows that high-stakes tests could be influential in effecting pedagogical change either positively or negatively. However, these studies give tentative results as to whether washback effects can be intentionally manipulated to produce specific changes in the teaching\ learning environments. It seems that washback represents a complex product of an interactive process between many factors that are specific to each given context. The conceptual essence of washback seems to be incapable of accommodating the complexity of testing, teaching, and learning practices in the field. Obviously, more empirical evidence of washback effects from new settings is badly needed to clarify better how this phenomenon can be properly gauged and effectively utilized in the domain of teaching and learning language.

Throughout my literature review, at least to the best of my knowledge, no concrete studies have been conducted in Palestine to investigate the relationship between a high stake exam, such as the GSC in general and the (TEE) in particular, and classroom performance. Despite the English language textbook change, the (TEE) itself has received little attention, and almost

into a channel for promoting their students' proficiency in English for realistic language use situations.

Ferman (2004) conducted a study which examined the washback effects of a new national EFL oral matriculation test in Israel. The participants of the study were 120 students, 18 teachers and 4 inspectors. Ferman adopted a multimethod approach employing four types of instruments: structured questionnaires, structured interviews, open interviews, and document analysis. The study revealed robust positive and negative washback effects for the new test on the educational processes.

Unfortunately, washback effects cannot always come up to the decision makers' expectations. For example, Qi (2004) examined the intended washback effects of the English National Matriculation Test in China in an attempt to show the extent to which this exam can produce intended changes in the English teaching and learning environments. The data for the study were collected by in-depth interviews from and follow-up contacts with eight test constructors, ten secondary school teachers, and three English inspectors. The findings indicated that the test constructors' intended positive washback was to create a shift from formal language knowledge to language practice and use. The results obtained from the participants, however, showed that little change was taking place, and there still was a great emphasis on formal linguistic knowledge in the classrooms rather than on the communicative use of language. Luxia Qi concluded that the exam brought about only limited intended washback effects in the language teaching and learning contexts in China.

Four years later, Qi (2007) investigated the actual and the anticipated effects of a writing task in the National Matriculation English Test in China on secondary school teaching and learning. The study was conducted on a massive number of test constructors, teachers, and students, using interviews, classroom observations and questionnaires. The study examined the writing practice in schools against test constructors' intentions to make students write in a communicative way. Qi concluded that there was a gap between the views of test constructors on the one hand and those of teachers and students on the other. For example, while teachers and students put great emphasis on mechanics of writing, grammar, and accuracy, test constructors paid little attention to these issues and emphasized the communicative context of writing. For teachers and students, accuracy received the highest proportion of

middle of the twentieth century (e.g., Vernon, 1956). Since then, it has been scrutinized in different settings from different perspectives (e.g. Popham, 1987; Frederiksen & Collins, 1989; Airaisian, 1988; Madaus, 1988; ...etc.). More recently, different empirical studies have been conducted to examine the effect of various types of tests in diverse settings: England (Green 2007, Scott 2005, North America (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996), China (Qi 2004; Qi 2007), Hong Kong (Cheng, 1997, 1998), Japan (Watanabe, 1996), Israel (Shohamy et al., 1996), Sri Lanka (Wall & Alderson ,1993; Wall, 1996), ... etc.

Cheng (1997) examined the washback effect of language testing during a process of introducing change in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) - a key public examination. Cheng distributed a questionnaire among 42 students. According to the results of Cheng's study, the students singled out the HKCEE as the greatest influential factor in their learning (30%), followed by the influence of future careers, their parents' worries, and contest with their peers (ibid: 47). This result lends greater support to the idea that high-stakes exams have the greatest impact on shaping students' learning.

In another study conducted to explore the washback effects of the English language component of the Japanese university entrance examination on teaching practices, Watanabe (2004) investigated the validity of some predictions made about the exam such as "frequent reference to the examinations; overreliance on grammar-translation methods; detailed explanations of formal structures of English rather than its use in actual communicative situations; little use of English aurally/orally; and a limited variety of classroom organization patterns". The data was collected via observation from English language classes of five teachers from three different schools, and via interviews held with the teachers prior to the observations. According to the obtained results, the predicted types of negative washback were detected in very few cases, and even in some cases reverse tendencies to the predictions were noticed. Watanabe (2004: 138) came to the conclusion that the entrance examination produced only a little negative washback to only certain aspects of some teachers' lessons, but triggered some sort of positive washback in which teachers could turn the exam preparation scheme

The objectives of the new textbook, English for Palestine, were set out by a team of Palestinian educators. The new textbook, published by Macmillan Education Ltd. and on which (TEE) 2009 was based, embraces two books: a student's book and a workbook. The student's book, which is described by innovators as more communicative, offers a complete language immersion for non-native speakers to enhance the students' abilities in oral and written language expression. The 12th grade textbook has ten units in all. The first six units are for all students; the last four units are for students who wish to further their education beyond high school. The complexity of the units increases gradually as the first few units have rather short and simple texts, progressing to more difficult and longer texts in the last few units. The text selections are current and provide real world experience to arouse the students' interest, but the new book has less literary selections than the abandoned one.

English for Palestine is more communicative than the previous textbook PETRA. It has less grammar and less literary selections. The aim of the 12th grade textbook is to combine all previous levels to culminate in a comprehensive program addressing listening skill, oral communication, reading skills, writing skills, language and cultural awareness as well as thinking and learning skills.

Specifically focusing on writing skills, this series directly facilitates, with ease if properly used, the students' abilities as writers. Within each unit, activities are related to the reading selection. Therefore, the students are given the background knowledge or research necessary in which to prepare a written composition. The students are guided with suggested opening sentence/s and paragraph-by-paragraph outline to address a specific audience on the topic purposed by the assignment.

Theoretically speaking, the 12th grade series, English for Palestine, if properly used, can effectively prepare students for the written component of the Tawjihi section on English Language. It provides information on real world issues that they can use in various situations post graduation. The students, in turn, can apply the writing skills obtained throughout this series to their future endeavors, either in their vocational stream or academic stream.

4. REVIEW OF LITERATURE:

The discussion of the impact of high-stake exams on teaching-cum-learning process in the literature of general education goes back to the

study is, therefore, meant to examine the influence that this examination may have on the teaching-cum-learning practices in the writing classroom, and to highlight the implications for language education in general, and for language testing, in particular.

3. CONTEXT AND USE OF THE (TEE):

The Tawjihi Exam (TE) is administered annually to more than 80,000 Palestinian students who complete their secondary education. Students have to get a “pass” grade in order to be awarded the General Secondary Certificate. As an examination-oriented system, the (TE) represents a significant turning point in the life of every Palestinian student. In this exam, the Palestinian student has to take tests in ten subjects, one of which is English – a compulsory subject for all candidates regardless of their academic stream.

In its present form (Appendix IV), the Tawjihi English Exam (TEE) consists of two papers; the first has two main parts (i) Reading Comprehension, and (ii) Vocabulary, and the second paper has three main parts: (i) Language, (ii) Literature, and (iii) Composition. According to its multiple purposes, the (TEE) is actually a combination of different types of testing. It is a proficiency test since it is intended to assess the students’ general language ability. But the importance of this test stems from the fact that it shapes the future life of all examinees each year. In fact, only those whose Tawjihi scores rank high have the chance to enroll at a university, but those who do not, have no chance to further their higher studies and usually go for the labour market.

The (TEE) can also be viewed as an achievement test because it is based on a syllabus. Although it assesses the students’ learning outcome of the English curricula throughout the twelve years of learning this language, its structure and content are actually based on the curriculum of the third secondary class (The last year of the secondary stage).

The old curriculum (called PETRA) on which (TEE) 2005 and downwards were based, consisted of two students’ books. The first, COURSE III, was meant for intensive reading and it contained eight units. Each unit included eight sections: a reading passage, vocabulary and notes on this passage, structure, guided composition, listening passage, conversation, pronunciation, and spelling. The second, ANTHOLOGY III, was intended to develop the students’ extensive or broad reading by means of a variety of prose (extracts of literary, social, scientific and newspaper/magazine writings) and poetry.

More recently, educators talk of tests' impact not only on learners and teachers but also on educational systems and society. For example, Shohamy (2001: 4) asserts that while "traditional testing" focuses on the test on its own without proper regard to testees, education and other relevant contexts, "use-oriented testing" takes into account the implications and consequences of the test results for all parties concerned, especially testees, teachers, learning material, and methods employed in the teaching-cum- learning context.

This paper begins by offering a brief description of the context and use of the Tawjihi English Exam (TEE) (Leaving Certificate) in Palestine. In the light of this description, the paper presents a comparative critical analysis of the writing section of this test for the year 2005 (a test version before textbook change) and 2009 (latest test version after the textbook change) to examine whether the textbook change has been accompanied by a change in the nature of the writing questions in the Tawjihi Exam. Then, the paper investigates, through two questionnaires and interviews with teachers, the influence that this exam may have on the teaching-cum-learning practices in the writing classroom. Finally, the paper concludes with recommendations for improving the writing component of the Tawjihi Exam.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT AND PURPOSE OF STUDY:

It is alarming to observe a general weakness in the school-leavers' writing abilities. One might claim that governmental school teachers' practices in the writing classroom tend to undermine the importance of the writing skill as a basic syllabus component, or that these practices are aimed at testing (i.e. teach to test). It is true that the English language textbook has been changed, but what counts is whether this change has practically led to tangible change in the teachers and students' practices regarding this skill, or whether anything has been done to improve (TEE) to create a match between the new textbook and this exam.

This query stems from my observation, as a university professor of English, of the low performance of governmental school-leavers when they get to a university or college. Most of them have to do a lot of remedial courses in English in general, and in writing in particular. All in all, the teaching practice regarding the writing skills at schools has to be investigated and reconsidered with an aim to improve the situation and find out workable solutions. This

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. This influence of the test on the classroom (referred to as washback by language testers) is, of course, very important; this washback effect can be either beneficial or harmful.” (p. 17)

In the same vein, Shohamy (1992: 513) defines washback in terms of language learners as test-takers when she describes “the utilization of external language tests to affect and drive foreign language learning in the school context.” She notes that “this phenomenon is the result of the strong authority of external testing and the major impact it has on the lives of test takers” (ibid). Shohamy cites the introduction of new English speaking tests in Israel, and the ACTFL Guidelines and Oral Proficiency Interview in the United States as two examples showing “the power of tests to change the behavior of teachers and students” (Shohamy, 1992, p. 514).

With regard to the intended use of a revised national exam in Sri Lanka to create curricular change, Pearson (1988: 106) detected an overt intention to employ public examinations as levers which will convince learners and teachers to pay heed to communicative skills and to practice teaching-learning activities that can potentially develop such skills. Furthermore, in a comparison between school tests and external tests, Shohamy (1993b: 186) states that external tests have become most influential tools that can initiate change and prescribe the behaviour of those affected by their results - administrators, teachers and students. In some contexts, decision makers, who are sensitive to the reliable power of general tests, usually employ such tests to enforce new textbooks and teaching methods. Thus external tests are currently used to motivate students to study, teachers to teach, and decision makers to modify the curriculum. Shohamy (ibid) refers to the use of general tests as levers for affecting the educational process as the “washback effect or measurement-driven instruction.”

In a study meant to examine the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE), Cheng (1997) used the term washback to mean “an active direction and function of intended curriculum change by means of the change of public examinations” (ibid: 38). In Cheng’s view, although the revision of the HKCEE syllabus was proposed to produce top-down intentional washback on English language teaching and learning in Hong Kong secondary schools, he admitted that unintentional side-effects could crop up (ibid: 39).

1. INTRODUCTION:

The relationship between teaching-cum-learning process and the testing endeavor has always been of paramount importance for language teachers and learners. The question of whether we should focus on the targeted skills in our teaching and learning or focus on preparing our learners for general tests has become an issue of concern for teachers, textbook designers, test writers and students. Green (2007: 76) reports the common assertion that tests can “narrow the curriculum”, and that “what is tested is what gets taught”.

This potential impact of testing on the teaching-cum-learning process is dubbed in the literature of linguistics as washback. Wall & Alderson (1993) were pioneers in looking analytically at the notion of test washback, suggesting that test designers should be more scientific about the intended impact of their tests, and that researchers in this field should build on research findings from other fields, and should employ more diverse research techniques (including classroom observation). Wall & Alderson (1993: 41) assert that tests can be influential controllers of what takes place in classrooms positively and negatively. Wall & Alderson (1993: 120-121) also draw a subtle line between high-stakes and low-stakes exams saying that “tests that have important consequences will have washback; and conversely, tests that do not have important consequences will have no washback”. Regarding the difference between high-stakes and low-stakes exams, Shohamy et al. (1996: 300), following Madaus (1990), claim that while the former entail making decisions about “admission, promotion, placement or graduation are directly dependent on test scores”, the latter do not involve such important decisions. In Abrams and Madaus’ (2003) view, all high-stakes tests are influential in shaping the teaching and learning activities in the classroom.

The diversity of washback interpretations and practices throughout the world makes it necessary to refine our understanding of this concept as a prelude to our work in this paper. In defining washback, earlier studies such as Buck (1988) and Shohamy (1992) used to take a narrow focus on teachers and learners in classroom settings. When Buck (1988) examined the apparent effect of Japanese university entrance examinations on English-language learning, with special focus on testing the listening skill, washback is described as follows:

“There is a natural tendency for both teachers and students to tailor their

Abstract:

This study is meant to examine the impact of the Tawjihi English Exam (TEE) on the practices of English language teachers and students in the writing classroom in Palestine. For this purpose, two questionnaires were distributed among 439 students and 49 teachers, and semi-structured interviews were held with 5 teachers.

The findings showed that teachers and students of English in Palestine work hard for the (TEE) itself at the expense of developing the writing skill. The study revealed that the majority of teachers give their students writing tasks taken from previous Tawjihi writing tests. Besides, most students reported skipping the writing sections in the textbook that are deemed to be not important for the Tawjihi writing test. The study also elicited the teachers and students' views on the importance of five main aspects of writing paragraphs and essays (i.e. mechanics, content, accuracy, organization, context /appropriateness). The components of "mechanics" and "linguistic accuracy" were rated as the most important, and "appropriateness and communicative context" were rated as least important.

Overall, the results of the study showed that the (TEE), to a large extent, shapes what happens in the English writing classroom. The study recommends a careful review of the various parts of the (TEE) in terms of their format, content, and weight.

Key words: washback, Tawjihi English Exam, test takers, high-stakes test, test-oriented system.

ملخص:

يقصد من هذه الدراسة أن تفحص أثر امتحان التوجيهي في اللغة الانجليزية على ممارسات كل من معلمي اللغة الانجليزية والطلبة في تدريس مهارة الكتابة في فلسطين. وقد تم لهذا الغرض توزيع استبانتيين على ٤٣٩ طالباً وطالبة و٤٩ معلماً ومعلمة، كما أجريت مقابلات لهذه الغاية مع ٥ مدرسين.

وقد بيّنت النتائج أن معلمي اللغة الانجليزية وطلبتها في فلسطين يبذلون جهداً كبيراً من أجل الامتحان ذاته على حساب تطوير مهارة الكتابة. كما أظهرت هذه الدراسة أن الغالبية الساحقة من المعلمين يعطون طلبتهم مهام كتابية مأخوذة من امتحانات الكتابة السابقة لامتحان التوجيهي. وبالإضافة إلى ذلك، فقد أفاد معظم الطلبة أنه يتم حذف الأجزاء المتعلقة بالكتابة من الكتاب المقرر لأنها تعدّ غير مهمة للجزء الخاص بالكتابة في امتحان التوجيهي وذلك استناداً إلى خبرتهم ومراجعتهم لأوراق الامتحان للسنوات السابقة، كما استنبطت الدراسة آراء المعلمين والطلبة حول أهمية خمسة جوانب رئيسة للفقرات والمقالات الكتابية (ميكانيكيات الكتابة، المحتوى، الدقة، التنظيم، السياق/الملاءمة). وقد اعتبر الجزآن المتعلقان «بالميكانيكية» و«سلامة اللغة» الأهم من بينها، بينما اعتبرت «الملاءمة» و«السياق التواصلي» الأقل أهمية.

وعلى العموم، أظهرت نتائج الدراسة أن امتحان التوجيهي في اللغة الانجليزية يحدد إلى حد كبير ما يحدث في حصص تدريس الكتابة في اللغة الانجليزية. وتوصي الدراسة بمراجعة حذرة للأجزاء المختلفة لهذا الامتحان فيما يتعلق بالشكل والمحتوى والوزن.

The Impact of the Writing Component of the Tawjihi English Exam on the Classroom Practices in Palestine

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