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# English Language Teaching in Nepal: Research, Reflection and Practice

Edited by David Hayes



# **English Language Teaching in Nepal: Research, Reflection and Practice**

Edited by David Hayes

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# Contents

Foreword ..... V

Foreword ..... VII

## Introduction

Key Issues in English Language Teaching and Learning in Nepal  
*David Hayes* ..... 1

## International perspectives

1. English and its Roles in Education:  
Subject or Medium of Instruction?  
*Rhona Brown* ..... 13
2. English Language Examination Reform:  
International Trends and a Framework for Nepal  
*Prithvi N. Shrestha* ..... 35
3. Action Research and Teacher Improvement  
*Amol Padwad* ..... 59

## Sponsored research studies

4. The Spread of English as a Medium of Instruction  
in Nepal's Community Schools  
*Min Bahadur Ranabhat and Subodh Babu Chilawal,*  
*with Richard Thompson* ..... 81
5. Why Some Low Resourced Community Schools in Nepal Perform  
Well in English  
*Jari Metsämuuronen and Jovan Ilic* ..... 107
6. The Impact of the School Leaving Certificate Examination on English  
Language Teaching and Student Motivation to Learn English  
*Saraswati Dawadi* ..... 133

## Case studies

7. Reflective Writing Practice in Higher Secondary EFL Classrooms  
*Ushakiran Wagle* ..... 165
8. Historical Developments in the Teaching and  
Learning of English in Nepal  
*Eak Prasad Duwadi* ..... 177
9. Shifting the Medium of Instruction to English in Community  
Schools: Policies, Practices and Challenges in Nepal  
*Laxmi Prasad Ojha* ..... 187
10. Is English Medium Instruction Working? A Case Study of Nepalese  
Community Schools in Mt. Everest Region  
*Jeevan Karki* ..... 201

11.	ELT Methods and Techniques in Nepali Secondary Schools <i>Gopal Prasad Bashyal</i> .....	219
12.	Socio-Cultural Characteristics of English Teachers in a Nepali Hinterland: A Case Study <i>Ashok Raj Khati</i> .....	239
13.	Teaching English in Under-Resourced Environments <i>Laxman Gnawali</i> .....	255
14.	Project NIITE: National Initiative to Improve Teaching in English <i>Vaishali Pradhan</i> .....	267

# **English Language Examination Reform: International Trends and a Framework for Nepal**





## English Language Examination Reform: International Trends and a Framework for Nepal

Prithvi N. Shrestha

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### Introduction

Examinations<sup>1</sup> are central to many education systems around the world. Examination in this context refers to externally organized educational assessment of individuals for certain purposes. Examinations are commonly administered in schools at the end of a level (e.g. primary or basic education) or at the end of schooling (e.g. secondary level). Therefore, both the government and the public are highly concerned about them. These examinations have three key purposes: *selection*, *certification* and *accountability* (Hill, 2013). School examinations help to select who should have access to secondary education, higher education or employment; they certify what skills and knowledge a student has achieved and which level they have passed. They also serve the purpose of assessing the effectiveness of the curriculum, evaluating schools and motivating teachers and students to enable their better performance. Depending on how well these examinations serve the stated purposes, they are reformed after a certain period of time if not deemed suitable by the government and other key stakeholders.

The government of Nepal is currently implementing a new education policy following the Education Act 8th Amendment of 4 June 2016 (eKantipur, 2016). Understanding international trends and success factors of the examination reform is thus timely. Against this background, this chapter presents current developments of state-level examination reforms in various countries, discusses their implications for education policies and proposes a framework for examination reform for Nepal. The chapter aims to provide an international perspective on examination reform in order to inform the future development of policies and practices in ELT in Nepal.

This chapter is based on desk research on examinations and their reforms globally. Although the chapter is about English language examination reforms, it draws on the literature related to general education where relevant. The chapter begins by exploring why governments reform school examinations. In particular, the chapter focuses on the external environment: political, educational and economic factors which influence the nature of school examinations in different ways (Shohamy, 2007). These factors are important because a combination of at least two of these factors or all are taken into account when a government decides to reform

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<sup>1</sup> 'Examinations' and 'tests' are used interchangeably in this chapter.

its school examination system. Having considered these factors, the chapter showcases case studies of examination reform in other countries from Africa (Kenya), Asia (Hong Kong SAR and Singapore) and Europe (Norway), drawing on the most current literature. How examination reforms were carried out in these countries, and their consequences and lessons learned are discussed. From these case studies, key issues for Nepal are identified. In order to give the reader a perspective on the examination system in Nepal in relation to the other countries discussed, this chapter then briefly reports on the history of examination reform, particularly English language examinations in Nepal.

After providing the context of the examination system in Nepal, the chapter makes a proposal for a framework of English language examination reform for Nepal based on research and current good practices. This section will specifically focus on what Nepalese education policy makers can do to reform examinations that have minimal negative consequences and how they can carry this out. Drawing on Shohamy (2007) and McNamara and Rover (2006), the proposed framework will discuss how it needs to consider the essential aspects of examination reform: stakeholder engagement, needs-basedness, links with the curriculum, intended and unintended consequences, and continuous research and development. Finally, a set of recommendations for Nepalese policy makers are made.

## Why examination reform?

So why do we need examination reform? Nepal is currently undergoing substantial educational reforms. This also means reforming examinations, especially the ones at the end of secondary education. The School Leaving Certificate (SLC) is a national examination at the end of secondary education (Grade 10). It has been criticized for being an unfair one and irrelevant to both further studies and employment (see Mathema, 2007; Mathema & Bista, 2006). Therefore, together with the educational reform, the school examination is in dire need of reforms for positive outcomes. The reform, however, needs to be considered in relation to a number of factors potentially influencing it.

School examination systems are established by a government or its agencies and thus play a vital role in serving the government's interests. This means examinations are likely to change when the government assumes they are not working or when it introduces a new educational policy. Changes in the examination system may be driven by a number of factors in the external environment as observed by the government. These factors which exert substantial influences on examination reforms may include *educational*, *political* and *economic* factors. Two other influential factors are *social* and *technological* but they appear to be less powerful than the other three when it comes to examination reforms by a government, although technology is increasingly affecting educational reforms. Given their pivotal role in reforming examinations and their potential influence in the Nepalese context, they deserve some discussion before considering how other countries have managed examination reforms.

### ■ Educational factors

A country's education system is influenced by new trends in education in the region and/or globally. These trends commonly result from changes in the philosophy of education. For example, until recently teachers were considered

as knowledge holders in the tradition of a transmission model of teaching and learners as 'empty vessels' which needed filling with information or knowledge from the teacher (Kumaravadivelu, 2012). The classroom practice and materials were designed to suit this purpose and so was the examination which required learners to memorise the information provided. However, in the second half of the last century, this view of teaching was increasingly replaced by other alternative approaches that promote more dialogue and interaction between the teacher and the learner. This view was reflected in teaching materials and teacher education programmes in many countries although any positive change in classroom practice was often reported as minimal. This type of reform can be clearly found in the field of ELT across the globe (Richards, 2008).

Examination systems have also been reformed as a result of this new educational knowledge. One clear example of this in ELT is the drive towards communicative language teaching (CLT) from the 1970s. This led to communicative language testing (Canale & Swain, 1980) which changed language testing and examinations both in the commercial sector (e.g. IELTS and TOEFL which are major commercial tests used globally for university admissions and employment in English speaking countries) and schools in most countries in the world. In a bid to promote CLT, many English language education projects were initiated by governments and funded by agencies such as the Department for International Development (UK), the US Department of State and the British Council [for examples of these projects see Pincas (1995) and Tribble (2012)]. Such projects often included reforming national English language examinations in schools alongside curricular reform, textbook development and teacher-training. For example, instead of only testing learners' reading and writing skills, their listening and speaking skills are also tested in national level school examinations in English. This change in turn is believed to have positively affected classroom practices. That is, teachers not only teach reading and writing but also concentrate on listening and speaking skills (see e.g. Qian, 2008).

### ■ Political factors

Educational factors alone do not influence educational and examination reforms. The political context of a country significantly determines both types of reform. Despite a proposed examination reform being educationally sound, unless the government or the ministry of education sees it serving their interests, it cannot happen. On the other hand, though a proposed reform may not be completely congruent with widely accepted educational values and philosophy, it may still go ahead due to the government's agenda. Therefore, the political factor is probably the most powerful in bringing about any change to the school examination system (as an example see the case of Hungary and Slovenia in Pizorn & Nagy, 2009).

Political decisions are made to reform examinations for various reasons. It could be because other governments are doing so in the region and thus the government wants to integrate its system with others in the region, which may then lead to political and economic benefits for the country. This happened in Macedonia where the government wanted to push for European Union membership (Murchan, Shiel, & Mickovska, 2012). It may be that a donor agency is interested in funding the reform and so there will be foreign money coming to invest in education in the country as in the case of the English in Action project in Bangladesh (Shrestha, 2013). It could equally be a tool for maintaining political power in the government

and continuing their domination, possibly favouring certain types of individuals and communities through changes in the examination as discussed by Little (1997) in Sri Lanka.

### ■ Economic factors

In the increasingly globalized world, educational reforms are seen by governments as a tool for economic advancement and participation in the global economy and the employment market. As a result, any reform in examinations is expected to demonstrate this. Furthermore, in the context of the global domination of the English language, its economic value is perceived highly by individuals and governments (see e.g., Erling, 2014; Shrestha, 2013) and any reform in English language examinations in particular also tends to be driven by economic factors.

The impact of economic factors on English language examinations can readily be observed, though it is more pronounced in commercial examinations such as IELTS and TOEFL including their variations. They are often promoted to suit different employment markets (for example, see the IELTS test website: <https://www.ielts.org/what-is-ielts/ielts-for-work>). Some of these English language tests are even targeted for specific employment markets or age groups, influenced by perceived economic benefits to test users. For instance, Cambridge Language Assessment offers its BULATS (Business Language Testing Service) to employers and educational institutions globally in four languages including English. The test is intended to reflect workplace language needs and standards given the value of communication skills in the workplace. Recently, the US-based Educational Testing Services (ETS) introduced TOEFL Junior® and TOEFL Primary™ focusing on school learners aged 11+ and those in primary schools respectively. These new tests seem to be driven by the growing economic value of the English language and the government's drive for English medium instruction in schools in non-English speaking countries like Nepal (Dearden, 2014).

The trend of international English language tests being influenced by economic factors has extended to national English language examinations too. For example, the end of school level English language tests in many countries including Nepal now incorporate listening and speaking components into the test because people with good verbal communication skills have a higher prospect of securing better jobs than those who lack them (see e.g. Casale & Posel, 2011 on South Africa). These tests help to certify the prospective employees' language skills and also help employers make selections of employees with appropriate English language skills. A clear example of economic value driven English language test reform by a government is the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) in Bangladesh promoted through different large-scale projects like English in Action in 2012 (for a review, see Das, Shaheen, Shrestha, Rahman, & Khan, 2014). The existing English language test in the SSC was reformed and the new test includes listening and speaking tests because the old test did not offer any indication of test-takers' verbal communication skills in English, which many Bangladeshi employers seek in their prospective employees as they participate in the global economy. The reformed test, however, may not necessarily address real needs in the workplace. This is so because often workplace needs change rapidly while the test may remain without any updates, thus creating a mismatch between what the workplace needs and what the test offers.

## Examination reform in other countries: case studies

In this section, I present a selected number of case studies in which I look at examination reforms in four economies in the world: Kenya, Hong Kong SAR, Singapore and Norway. These case studies are selected because (1) they provide us with insights into what works best and what may not work when changing an examination system, and (2) they represent diverse contexts and the most recent examination reforms in the published literature. Additionally, the reforms in these case study countries were influenced by the factors discussed in the previous section. I will be particularly focusing on English language examination reforms although some case studies are on general examination reforms in schools due to their relevance to Nepal. The case studies are presented in alphabetical order.

### ■ Hong Kong SAR

The first case study is from Hong Kong which has its own education system as an autonomous region of China, classified as a developing economy by the UN<sup>2</sup>. The examination reform reported in this case study is based on David Qian's (Qian, 2008, 2014) research papers and the Hong Kong examination authority's website. This case study is specifically about English language examination reforms since 1997 when Hong Kong was handed back to China by the UK.

Although Hong Kong's education system was largely modeled on the one in the UK, after 1997 a number of changes took place which affected the examination system too. Hong Kong had two main public examinations at the school level until 2011: Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examinations (HKCEE, end of Grade 11) and Hong Kong Advanced Level Examinations (HKALE, end of Grade 13) (Hill, 2013). These two examinations were run by the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (HKEAA). The two examinations included English language examinations which functioned as gatekeepers for selection to further and higher education and as an indicator of students' general English language proficiency. In addition to these two exams, students in Hong Kong schools sat up to four additional public examinations in English let alone mid and end of semester examinations. This shows the examination-oriented culture of Hong Kong. As high-stakes examinations, HKCEE decided whether a student could continue to senior secondary education and HKALE determined if a student could enter university.

HKCEE had two versions of the English language test: Syllabus A and Syllabus B. Although candidates could choose which one to sit, Syllabus B was meant for higher proficiency candidates. Until 2007, the test was norm-referenced (ranked against other candidates) and had four papers: 1) Writing (26%), 2) Reading comprehension and usage (24%), 3) Task-based integrated listening, reading and writing (32%), and 4) Oral English (18%). From 2007, the test was changed to a standards-referenced one (assessed against set standards or criteria) and had three papers: 1A) Reading (20%), 1B) Writing (20%), 2) Listening and integrated skills (30%), and 3) Speaking (15%). An additional component of school-based assessment was introduced to HKCEE in 2007 which was weighted at 15% of

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<sup>2</sup> This classification is based on the UNO's World Economic Situation and Prospects 2014 available from: [http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wesp/wesp\\_current/2014wesp\\_country\\_classification.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/wesp/wesp_current/2014wesp_country_classification.pdf)

HKCEE. Until 2007 the results were reported using a grading system from A – F (A being the highest and F a failure) as in the GCSE in the UK. From 2007, HKCEE results were reported as performance levels: Level 5\* - Level 1 (Level 5\* being the highest level).

HKALE had an English language paper called Use of English. The test assessed candidates' English language skills which were deemed to be required in tertiary education and future employment. This test originally had three sections: 1) Reading speed, 2) Reading comprehension and written composition and 3) Listening test. It underwent a number of changes and the final version of the test (i.e., 2010) included these components: 1) Listening (18%), 2) Writing (18%), 2) Reading (6%) and Language Systems (12%), 4) Oral English (tested in groups of 4, 18%), and 5) Practical skills for work and study (28%). This version of the test seemed to have given importance to practical communication skills. The grading used in HKALE was similar to that in HKCEE: A – F. A minimum of grade E was required for university entry.

The Hong Kong government has recently made some radical changes to the examination system. It introduced School-Based Assessment (SBA) in 2007 with the aim of improving teaching and learning in schools. SBA carries 15% of the examination marks and is closely aligned with the curriculum. More importantly, the long tradition of a norm-referenced examination was changed to a standards-referenced one. Thus, the focus shifted from assessment of learning to assessment for learning, a form of alternative assessment (see Lynch, 2001 for a discussion).

As part of the examination reform, from 2012, students in Hong Kong secondary schools need to sit only one national examination instead of two. HKCEE and HKALE were replaced by the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education (HKDSE) in 2012 which includes SBA. According to HKEAA (2016), the English language examination has this format: 1) Reading (20%), 2) Writing (25%), 3) Listening and integrated skills - listening, reading and writing tasks related to study and workplace contexts (30%), 4) Speaking – group interaction and individual response (10%) and 5) SBA (15%) - an individual oral presentation and a group interaction ([http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/en/hkdse/hkdse\\_subj.html?A1&1&2\\_1](http://www.hkeaa.edu.hk/en/hkdse/hkdse_subj.html?A1&1&2_1) ). Each part of the examination assesses candidates' achievement against a set of learning outcomes in the four skill areas: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The introduction of SBA to the school examination has had mixed responses from different stakeholders (Qian, 2008; 2014). While the reform was welcomed as an innovative approach, many teachers showed resentment and resistance due to the demanding nature of SBA, teachers' lack of assessment literacy, timely professional development support and shared understanding of the approach. There were other additional concerns about SBA which relate to reliability and validity across teachers and schools and the whole notion of how to incorporate assessment into teaching and learning. More importantly, despite the widespread appeal of SBA as a form of assessment for learning in western countries (Stanley, MacCann, Gardner, Reynolds & Wild, 2009), it has a long way to go in an examination-oriented culture like Hong Kong.

The reform in Hong Kong and its challenges are of importance to Nepal. This is especially because of the proposed changes resulting from the new education

policy (see MOE, 2009), though the Education Act has not yet been passed in parliament.

## ■ Kenya

The second case study is from Kenya, an East African developing country. This case study is based on work by Paul Wasanga and Anthony Somerset (2013). Somerset contributed to the reform process of the examination system in the 1970s and 80s and Wasanga manages the current examination system in Kenya.

The formal education system in Kenya has eight years of primary and four years of secondary education. This is followed by tertiary education. The end of the primary and secondary levels are marked by two national examinations: the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE). These two examinations replaced the older examination system in 1985. The Kenya National Examination Council (KNEC) has been responsible for these two examinations since 1980.

Wasanga and Somerset (2013) report that the earlier version of KCPE contained only multiple choice questions in all subjects, including English, until 1973 when it was realized that the multiple choice questions were mainly recall-based and lacked assessment of any higher order skills and creativity. As a result, the test had negative washback effects on classroom learning where the focus was on memorizing facts. Further, the test also advantaged certain types of students (e.g., those from high socio-economic backgrounds). In order to address this problem, a composition paper was introduced to the English language test in addition to the multiple choice test. Other subjects also started including questions that tested higher order thinking and problem-solving skills from 1974 onwards. The new version of the KPCE English test still faced a problem despite having a composition paper because it asked students to describe something predictable (e.g. 'My home'). Therefore, it was subsequently reformed in 1980 to include more open-ended and creative tasks in the composition paper by focusing on communication skills.

According to the authors, the rationale for the reform appears to be economic, educational, political and social, driven by four factors: 1) relevance of the test to the test taker's future lives (economic); 2) fairness of the test to those who are disadvantaged (social); 3) prediction of 'right' students for limited secondary school places (political); and 4) quality enhancement of education across primary schools and geographical regions (educational).

As part of the reform, its effect was monitored from 1978 onwards. The monitoring found that, despite these positive factors influencing the test reform, English tests continued to favour students with higher socio-economic status. This meant changing the focus of English test from assessing more idiomatic language used in everyday conversations to the way it is used in wider contexts for receiving and communicating information. The reform process also involved disseminating examination feedback to enhance education quality to different stakeholders, especially head teachers, schools and the public. This led to the publication of tables showing school performance across districts and the nation which immediately caught the attention of the news media and the general public. Wasanga and Somerset (2013) argue that this type of dissemination had a positive



effect on schools which improved, among other things, the quality of classroom instruction and teacher support. However, the school level performance tables became controversial and were thus discontinued.

A major output of the test reform in Kenya was the introduction of an annual newsletter, reporting which concepts and skills were found to be difficult by the candidates from the previous year and suggesting how they could be taught more effectively. Until recently it was distributed freely to each school. This annual newsletter seems to be the most sustainable and systematic component of the test reform that has helped to improve the quality of education in Kenya. In its more current version, the newsletter focuses on the questions in the KCPE examination that are answered correctly by 30 – 40% candidates only.

It is argued that the KCPE English examination has promoted inequalities among students, schools and socio-economic groups, especially after a recent increase in the number of private primary schools, a trend noticed in Nepal too. Many aspects of the Kenyan examination reform may be considered for Nepal.

### ■ Singapore

This third case study relates to a relatively affluent country in East Asia, Singapore. This case study draws on a paper by Christina Ratnam-Lim and Kelvin Tan (2015) who examined the recent large-scale implementation of formative assessment in Singapore.

Singapore has a system of six years' primary and four years' secondary education followed by two years' post-secondary education. At the end of each level, there is a high-stakes national examination: Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE), General Certificate of Education N and O Levels (Secondary) and General Certificate of Education A Levels (Post-Secondary). These examinations directly affect the admission of a student to secondary, post-secondary and tertiary education. The examination system had been considered a fair means of evaluating educational attainment although the system has been criticised for making the education system too examination-orientated and having negative washback effects such as, *inter alia*, teachers teaching to the test from the primary level, widening socio-economic gaps, devaluing vocational education and 'education for earning, not learning' (Ratnam-Lim & Tan, 2015, p. 62). As a result of these criticisms, in 2009 the Ministry of Education introduced a school-based assessment system, similar to SBA in Hong Kong, called 'Holistic Assessment' and implemented it in all primary schools in 2014. The idea behind this assessment approach is overall development of a learner by emphasising skills development and providing constructive feedback to support meaningful learning rather than just focusing on examination results. However, the implementation of this approach has met with a number of challenges resulting from social, political and economic factors prevalent in the country which influence all stakeholders, especially teachers and parents.

The key reform to PSLE has been in two areas: 1) Qualitative feedback for improvement and 2) 'Bite-sized' assessment as an alternative to one-off examinations (i.e., mini assessment with formative purposes). In terms of implementing these two aspects of assessment, teachers play a key role as implementation agents, a role which may be influenced by parents' attitudes

towards assessment. Ultimately, Ratnam-Lim and Tan (2015) argue that teachers' understanding of assessment and their actual practice can make the reform a success or a failure. They report that many teachers and parents believe that the intention of Holistic Assessment is good and signals the value of both academic and non-academic development of a learner. The new system also lessens anxiety or stress among students. However, in practice, teachers were still teaching students to the test and some teachers are not equipped with the skills necessary for providing constructive feedback to their students. More importantly, many teachers felt that the new assessment system increased their workload due to smaller assessments turning into mid-year and end-year assessments. Furthermore, parents still want their children to prepare for the examination (PSLE) which puts pressure on teachers.

Providing constructive feedback to students has been challenging though considered useful. This concept is interpreted differently by teachers and parents. There is a question of who it is for: parents or children? Equally, due to the number of students in the classroom (30 – 40), teachers are unable to provide personalised feedback to students and the feedback is standardised and thus of little value. This practice is a result of the old habit of teachers providing summative feedback.

Bite-sized assessments were not without problems either. Teachers saw them as tests because scores on these assessments counted towards the final grade. This meant more stress for the students, their parents and teachers due to the greater frequency of the assessment. Ratnam-Lim and Tan (2015) report that teachers spend more time on conducting assessments which then leaves less time for teaching. Teachers also tend to teach their students to the mini-test. In the context of Singapore, all this could be related to the emphasis laid on meritocracy and the importance of high-stakes examinations. Thus, the well-intended formative assessment system ended up being subservient to the high-stakes PSLE. The challenges faced by a school-based assessment system need to be considered for Nepal where the new education policy proposes school-based assessment, which may encounter difficulties similar to those in Singapore.

## ■ Norway

This last case study is on a developed western European country, Norway. The case study is based on a paper by Sverre Tveit (2014). The examination reform reported here is from 2006.

Norway has 10 years of compulsory education for under 16s. Primary education lasts seven years followed by three years' lower secondary education. Students completing lower secondary education have the right to three years' upper secondary education before entering university. Traditionally, unlike Singapore and Hong Kong, Norway has been against any formal assessment or examinations of students in lower secondary education (Grades 8 – 10).

The Ministry of Education and Research implemented a reform called *The Knowledge Promotion* in 2006 in order to raise achievement for all students. The reform emphasizes an outcomes-based curriculum which seems to be in response to the international positioning of Norway through tests such as PISA<sup>3</sup> (Tveit, 2014). For example, Norway was ranked 24<sup>th</sup> on PISA reading assessment in 2006, 12<sup>th</sup> in 2009 and 22<sup>nd</sup> in 2012. The curriculum was reformed accordingly by focusing on measurable outcomes. Importantly, it stresses skills like expressing oneself orally, expressing oneself in writing and reading. A set of competence aims were designed for students to achieve by the end of each level.

As a result of the curricular reform, new assessment procedures and instruments have been implemented. The key ones include formative assessment, national tests and examinations at different levels. The formative assessment approach adopted is based on international developments in the field of *assessment for learning* as theorized by Black and Wiliam (2009). The teacher assesses the quality of students' work on an on-going basis and provides formative feedback to support learning. The Norwegian reform is heavily informed by research which also highlighted important issues such as teacher assessment literacy. In order to improve teacher assessment literacy, they are provided with professional development support. Teachers were trained to make learning goals more specific and to emphasize skills.

A national test system was established in 2004 to monitor the quality of education and hold schools and municipalities accountable for school quality and student achievements. There are compulsory national tests for Grades 5 and 8 (English, reading and maths) and Grade 9 (reading and maths). These tests provide information about students' achievements and skills to different stakeholders (e.g., parents, school leaders). They are also meant to help teachers identify their students' strengths and weaknesses to improve their teaching. Research, however, shows that this has not happened.

The other major assessment instrument is examinations. In Norway, there are two types of examinations: external and local. Students sit one external and one local examination at the end of Grade 10. In the upper secondary, students take three to four examinations, one of which is a compulsory external examination of the Norwegian language. These examinations are used as a school leaving certificate. A six-point marking scale of 1 to 6 is used, 1 being a fail. Examiners are offered continuous professional development through training and seminars, and are provided with a comprehensive assessment guide and achievement level descriptors.

In addition, students in lower secondary and upper secondary are awarded overall achievement marks for certification purposes. Starting in Grade 8, these marks are based on various tests, assignments and other student work throughout the year. The emphasis is on students' growth over the course of the school year and skills such as creativity and collaborative skills. Students are awarded an overall

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<sup>3</sup> *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)*: this is a triennial international survey which aims to evaluate education systems worldwide by testing the skills and knowledge of 15-year-old students. PISA is organized by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

achievement mark for each subject. A six-point marking scale of 1 to 6 is used, 1 being a fail.

These examination reforms brought a number of challenges too. These challenges are highlighted by continuous research on curricular and assessment reforms. One obvious challenge is tensions between policy and practice. The new policy means using teacher assessment for certification purposes (high-stakes) which also serves as formative assessment (low-stakes). In the absence of a clear national guideline on standards descriptors and potential inconsistency among teachers assessing students, validity, reliability and fairness of assessment are questioned, a case similar to Hong Kong and Singapore. The case has been complicated by the fact that formal marking has always been prohibited at the primary level. More importantly, there is a dilemma whether to have measurable learning outcomes and national standards to make assessment consistent and comparable which may promote instrumental learning rather than deep learning. The Norwegian case shows the importance of multiple assessment instruments and continuous stakeholder engagement, equally applicable to Nepal.

## **A brief history of English language examination reform in Nepal**

Having considered school examination reforms in other countries, it is important to provide an overview of examination reform in Nepal. As in many countries, amidst so many political changes since 1990, the Nepalese government has initiated educational and examination reforms in the last three decades which seemed to result primarily from political changes and as a response to ongoing educational reforms in other South Asian countries. Although Nepal does not have a long history of a school examination system, it has undergone some major reforms in terms of its English language examinations.

Nepal has a system with 12 years of school education as in many Asian countries. Until this year (2016), it had four stages: (1) Primary - Grade 1 to 5, (2) Lower Secondary – Grade 6 to 8, (3) Secondary – Grade 9 and 10 and (4) Higher Secondary – Grade 11 and 12. More recently, the School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) 2009 – 2015 (MOE, 2009) has divided the system into two phases, like in Kenya, which will be implemented from 2017: Basic School (Grade 1 – 8) and Secondary School (Grade 9 – 12). As in many Asian countries (Hill, 2013), students in Nepal sit a number of tests and public examinations in school and they all are high-stakes with severe consequences for students and their parents. These tests and examinations are norm-referenced and marks from 1 to 100 are awarded to students in all subjects including English. They must secure a minimum of 32 marks to pass the examination.

Until now, the main school examination has been associated with the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) at the end of 10 years' schooling and this will be the focus in this section. The SLC examination board was established in 1934 when Nepal was under the autocratic Rana regime (for a review of the education system and English language education in Nepal, see Mathema, 2007; Shrestha, 2009). The SLC examination is centrally managed by the Office of the Controller of Examinations (OCE), a constituent body of the Ministry of Education. The actual administration of the SLC is the responsibility of the District Education Office in each district. This

examination has always been high-stakes and determines students' future study or career. English language is one of the six compulsory subjects in this examination and constantly has a high failure rate (Mathema & Bista, 2006).

It has not been possible to find or access written records of the nature of SLC English examinations prior to the 1980s and research on the SLC English test is limited to only a few studies. Based on my own personal knowledge and experience<sup>4</sup> and the available published literature, the SLC examination began with single papers in all subjects across the country. However, five regional versions (one in each of the five regions) of the SLC examination were introduced in 1998 to avoid test security problems and to minimize costs.

The SLC English examination has always been biased towards reading and writing. Listening and speaking skills were not tested prior to 1998 although about 5% of marks were allocated to test syllable stress and intonation through multiple choice questions in writing. Reading was assessed through gap-fill, multiple choice, true-false and matching items. Out of two reading passages, one was from the textbook and the other was an unseen one. There was an emphasis on decontextualized grammar and vocabulary items and candidates could answer most questions by memorizing. Writing was assessed through a written composition task already known to the candidate. However, with the curricular reform in 1998, the SLC English paper changed drastically, as shown in the table below, and has continued in this form to date with some minor modifications.

**Table 1:** SLC paper 2016

Skills	Question types	Marks (%)
Listening	Audio or examiner voice: Multiple choice, gap-fill, true-false, ordering (any two)	10
Speaking	Interview, cued situation, story-telling, describing pictures, charts (any two)	15
Reading	Two seen texts from Grade 10 Two unseen authentic texts (e.g., chart, graph, table, advert, etc.) Multiple choice, gap-fill, true-false, ordering, short questions, matching	40
Writing and grammar	Guided writing (two) Free writing (one) Grammar	35

Despite the changes to the examination, there has been no major shift from testing students' memory (e.g. seen reading passages, decontextualized grammar) to creativity and real communication skills in English. Unlike in countries such as Hong Kong, the reform in Nepal seems to be 'cosmetic' only, which may be due to the

<sup>4</sup> In the mid-1980s, I was an SLC candidate and experienced myself how the SLC examination impacted on my career path. Despite my keen interest in science, I could not enrol in a science programme due to my SLC marks. So I studied English language.

change in neighbouring countries and thus political. The same situation is reflected in other examinations held at Grade 8 which do not assess speaking and listening. A change to the grading system was introduced to the SLC in 2016. Instead of marks, students were awarded letter grades A+ to N, in which A+ is the highest. This grading system is similar to most South Asian and many other countries in the world.

For a variety of reasons including a high rate of failures, the SLC examination has been criticized (Budhathoki et al., 2014; Mathema & Bista, 2006). Possibly in response to this and as planned in the SSRP (2009), the Education Act (Eighth Amendment) 2016 was passed by parliament on 4 June 2016. It states that the national SLC examination is to be phased out and will be replaced by a regional examination in Grade 10 which will be conducted under the guidelines of the new National Examination Board. There will be a national level Higher Secondary Level Certificate (HSLC) examination at the end of Grade 12. The SSRP also proposes a continuous assessment system at all grade levels in schools to promote learning. This is similar to the case study countries like Singapore. Its implementation and success remain to be seen.

## **A potential model for examination reform in Nepal**

Based on the review of school curricular and examination reforms in other countries and Nepal itself, a potential model for examination reform is proposed in this section. It takes account of social, political, economic and educational factors which influence all aspects of the English examinations.

The figures below present a possible process and a model of English language examination reform in Nepal. Figure 1 shows a cyclical, or even spiral, and dynamic process of examination reform. The reform process needs to be staged and should include essential elements such as needs analysis and environmental scanning. Each stage needs to feed into the subsequent stage. This process needs to be carried out by incorporating the model presented in Figure 2.

**Figure 1:** A possible process for examination reform in Nepal

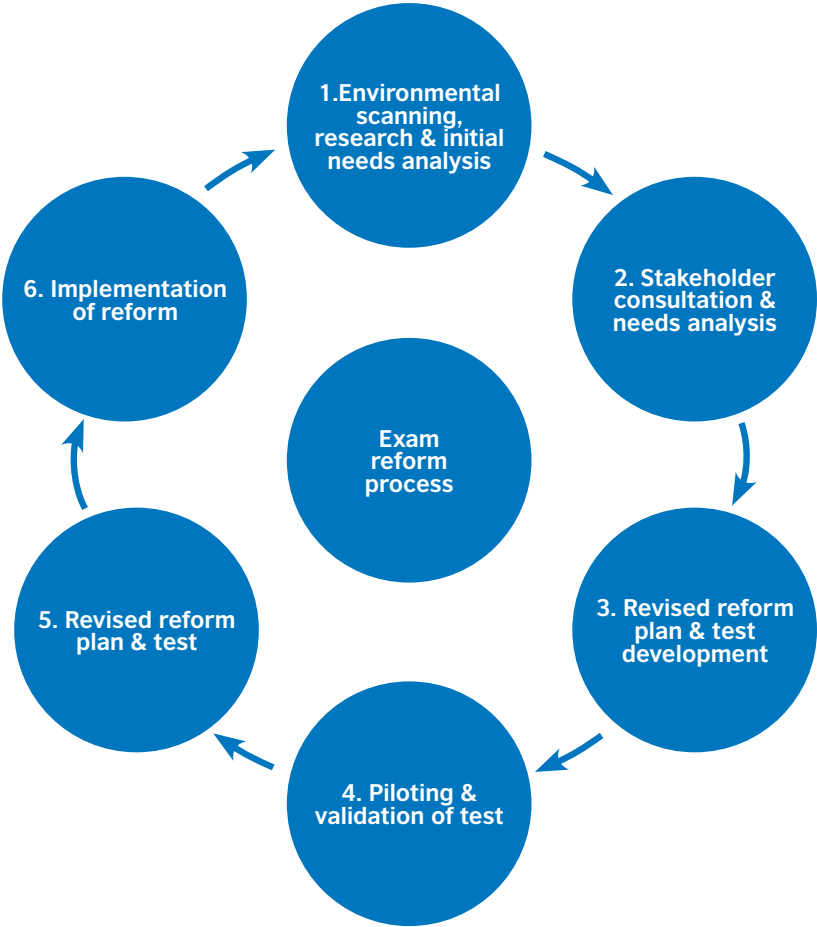
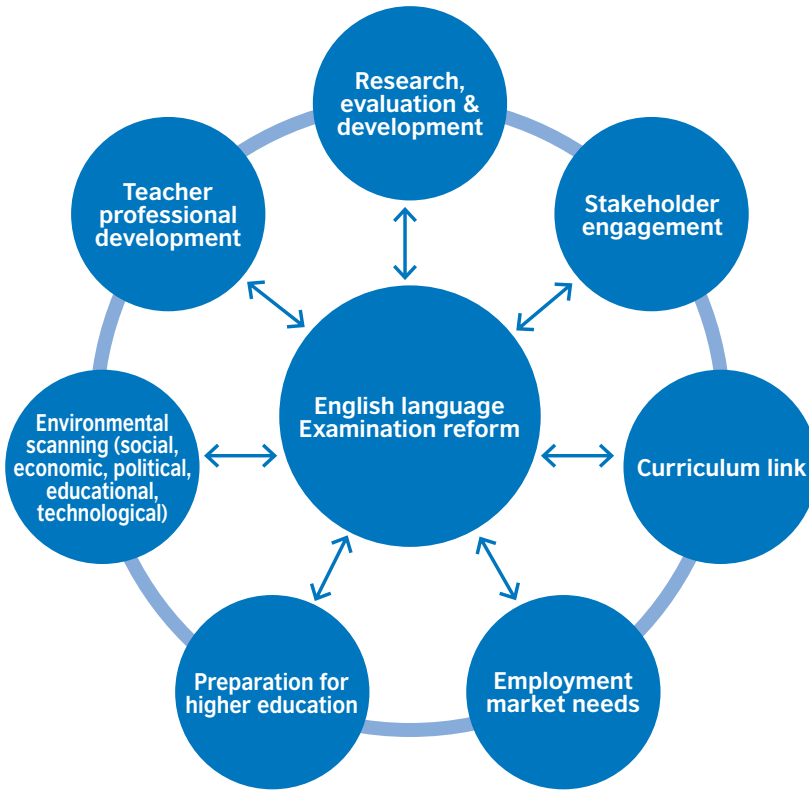


Figure 2 shows different elements of the examination reform that need to be considered in the process for its success. Except for Environmental scanning, which is discussed in Section 2 above, each element is described below.

**Figure 2:** A potential model of examination reform in Nepal



### ■ Stakeholder engagement

As noted earlier, a number of stakeholders have stakes in school examinations. Among them, students, teachers and parents are probably the most directly influenced by any change or the use of the examination for different purposes. The other important stakeholders are employers and higher education institutions. To date, there has hardly been any official engagement with these key stakeholders while planning the examination reform in Nepal. The most that has happened is a consultation with some subject experts and teachers. Yet, any examination reform, however well-intended and educationally sound it may be, needs to engage students, parents, teachers and employers in order to measure the test impact on them (see Dawadi, in progress). In particular, with the imminent introduction of the continuous assessment system in schools, teachers' assessment literacy may jeopardize its intended purpose, as has happened in Bangladesh (Das et al., 2014), if teachers are not engaged as part of the examination reform plan and lack appropriate assessment skills. There are implications for English teachers whose language proficiency may not be adequate for teaching.

### ■ Real needs based to suit the job market and higher education

The English language is dominant in the job market. Current school English examinations, such as the SLC, do not deal with the English language needs



required in a job. The SLC is heavily focused on reading, writing and grammar tasks that have very little to do with the job market and higher education needs despite the curriculum embracing a communicative approach (Mathema & Bista, 2006). As in Hong Kong, the English examination needs to integrate the language skills and assess students' communicative skills required both in study and workplace contexts. These skills obviously need to be taught as part of the curriculum. As the majority of school graduates pursue higher education and there is an increasing trend to introduce English medium instruction in Nepalese universities, the school leaving English examination reform should consider what English language knowledge and skills are needed to study at university in order to narrow the gap between school education and higher education.

### ■ **Continuous research and development**

It is essential that the validity of a test is continuously investigated and monitored so that it serves the intended purpose and its unintended consequences are minimised. An examination is meant not only to serve the purpose of certification but also to have positive effects on teaching and learning, and any other use such as employment, study and immigration. In the context of Nepal, only a few studies (e.g. Budhathoki et al., 2014; Mathema & Bista, 2006) have been conducted to investigate examination impacts. The recommendations of such studies have not been fully considered. Equally, the newly proposed continuous assessment system does not seem to have been piloted yet. As a result, any examination reform is likely to be distant from the reality of the Nepalese context if it is simply copied from another country. Even when there is carefully planned research within the reform, things can go wrong (see Qian, 2014). Continuous research helps to identify both intended and unintended consequences of an examination. Thus, it helps to develop a more inclusive and fairer examination, ensuring its validity. This may also mean considering a range of options to meet the needs of the key stakeholders.

### ■ **Curriculum linked**

Any examination is meant to assess skills and knowledge taught in the curriculum. If the English language curriculum aims to develop communicative skills in English, both teaching and assessment need to reflect this. As noted earlier, the school English curriculum promotes communicative skills. However, the English examination tests those skills in a significantly limited way. It is, therefore, essential for the English test to assess English language communication skills relevant to study and the workplace, as in Hong Kong. For example, the speaking test should be made more realistic by making it a pair or group interaction rather than a teacher-student dialogue. The English language test questions should not test students' memorization skills. Instead, they should assess their creative and critical thinking skills and communicative competence in the language as reflected in the curriculum.

### ■ **Teacher professional development**

In almost all the case studies above, when the examination reform was implemented, despite good intentions, the reform encountered problems associated with teachers. In particular, teachers' lack of the professional skills needed for assessing their students was causing difficulty to the implementation of the reform even in a well-developed country like Norway. Teachers' assessment literacy in Nepal is possibly significantly low, given the lack of resources and

opportunities for their professional development. The situation is worse in public schools in the rural area of the country where schools lack qualified teachers. All of this is exacerbated by teacher's low proficiency in the English language itself. Therefore, English language examination reform in Nepal needs to provide English teachers with professional development opportunities for improving their English language proficiency as in Bangladesh (Shrestha, 2014) and develop assessment literacy through workshops and seminars. Without this, the reform is likely to fail.

At the time of writing this paper, the examination reform in Nepal seems to have confused teachers, students and parents due to the lack of clarity on the reform process and communication with these stakeholders. For example, although the SLC is being phased out, it is not clear by when the new system will be in place and what the school textbooks will be like. The best the Ministry of Education seems to have done is consult education experts from universities regarding stakeholder engagement. So in relation to the proposed model, there have been attempts to engage only one or two types of stakeholders, ignoring key stakeholders such as teachers and students. However, partial environmental scanning, especially of political, economic and educational factors, does seem to have been carried out.

## Conclusions/Summary

This chapter began with reasons why school examinations are reformed. In particular, the effects of political, economic and educational factors were discussed. These factors play important roles in reshaping the school curriculum and the associated examination. In addition, other factors, such as social and technological, influence examination reform in terms of its implementation and success. If these factors are not taken into account, any examination reform is likely to encounter many difficulties. Therefore, examination reform in Nepal should consider how these factors affect the reform and how any risks can be mitigated.

In order to showcase how examination reforms have been managed in other countries, four case studies were presented. They represented both developing and developed economies, and very different contexts (Hong Kong SAR, Kenya, Singapore and Norway). The success of the examination reform varied from one country to another and some of the challenges they faced were quite similar; for example, implementing school-based assessment in Hong Kong, Singapore or Norway. The reforms in these countries were influenced by the factors discussed above, although the effects of some may have been stronger than others, according to context. Examination reform in Nepal could draw on the lessons learned in these countries and lessen potential risks.

Based on these case studies and the wider literature on examination reform, a framework for English language examination reform in Nepal was proposed. In particular, an iterative process of the examination reform with clearly identified key stages was presented. This process should take into account the various components of the model proposed. The process needs to:

1. scan the environment (i.e., social, political, educational, economic and technological);

2. engage with key stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, employers, higher education institutions, English language education experts) from the start;
3. ensure clear links between the curriculum and the examination;
4. invest in conducting continuous research and evaluation to ensure the validity of the test and develop inclusive tests to meet the changing needs of test users; and
5. offer professional development opportunities to teachers.

It should be noted that the relationship between these components is not linear but dynamic. Most importantly, the examination reform process is cumulative and continuous which the proposed model advocates. The reform process should also consider all contextual variables which may support or hinder the process.

As part of the current reform process in Nepal, the steps taken to date are partially in line with the proposed model here. They include partial environmental scanning by education experts, consultations with education and testing experts from universities and a limited amount of research and evaluation. The reform process could make a real and positive difference to all stakeholders and the country's education system and economy if it followed the model proposed in its entirety.

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**Dr. Prithvi Shrestha** is Senior Lecturer and Head of English Language Teaching in the Department of Languages at The Open University. Prior to moving to the UK in 2002, he worked as a secondary school English language teacher and teacher educator in Nepal for 12 years. As an English language education expert, he has worked in two donor-funded large international development projects in South Asia: English in Action (Bangladesh) and TESS-India. He has worked in a number of funded language assessment research projects including IELTS (Bangladesh and Nepal) and APTIS. His research, underpinned by sociocultural theory and systemic functional linguistics, has focused on language assessment, English for specific purposes, academic writing, and educational technologies. He has published a number of books, peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters in these fields.

English is gaining in importance in Nepal as a whole and in education in particular, as in so many countries around the world where it is seen as a key driver for socio-economic advancement for individuals as well as national economies. The extent to which this is a perception or a reality is contested but there is no doubt that English functions as an aspirational language for many people in Nepal. In recent years there has been an expansion in English-medium education amongst government (community) schools, partly as a response to the perceived successes of students in institutional (private) schools, which have for long used English as a medium of instruction, in national examinations and in gaining access to higher education. There has, however, been a lack of systematic research into how English is being taught and learned in schools across Nepal, whether as a medium of instruction or as a subject.

This publication, which is the first of its kind to bring together papers investigating key issues in English language teaching in Nepal, is therefore timely and important. It encompasses international perspectives on English as a medium of instruction, examination reform and teacher development through action research which offer interesting insights for practice in Nepal, as well as research and case studies investigating issues as diverse as methods in use in schools, socio-cultural characteristics of English teachers, reflective writing in secondary schools and teaching in under-resourced environments. The British Council, the editor and the chapter authors hope that readers will find in this volume much interesting information about the current state of English language teaching in Nepal as well as insights into how it may be improved and made more relevant for learners in schools across the country.



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