

High-Stakes Test Impact on Student Motivation to Learn

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Abstract

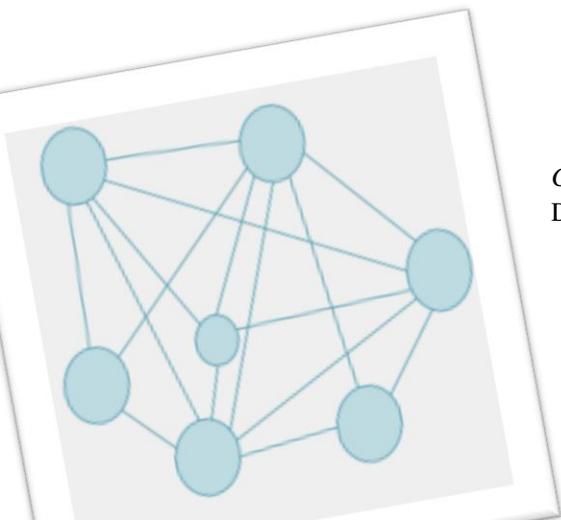
This paper reports on a study that explored the impacts of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) English test on students' motivation to learn English. Unlike previous studies on test impact, this study has extensively explored both the pre-test and post-test impacts of the test on students' motivation to learn English. The data generated through a longitudinal survey among 247 SEE candidates and semi-structured interviews with six students and their parents in both the pre-test and post-test contexts indicates that the majority of students (79%) were motivated to learn English in the pre-test context but more than half of the students (54%) were discouraged from learning English in the post-test context. There were several reasons behind their demotivation to learn English in the post-test context including unfair judgement in the test and poor conduction of its speaking test. Pedagogical implications of the study have been discussed.

Keywords: High-stakes test, test design, student motivation, test impact

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INTRODUCTION

The research reported in this paper explored the impacts of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE) English, a high-stakes test in Nepal, on students' motivation to learn English. It should be noted that the SEE was previously known as the School Leaving Certificate (SLC). Therefore, the terms SLC and SEE are used to refer to the same examination in this paper. The SEE serves several functions such as a gateway to higher education, a measure of students' language skills, and a basic license for most official employment in Nepal (Dawadi & Shrestha, 2018). Additionally, the SEE results are also a measure of "what strengths and weaknesses exist in the education system at a given point in time, and how the education system is performing over the years" (Mathema & Bista, 2006, p.4). It is also worth pointing out the SEE English test is divided into two: speaking test (that includes listening and speaking skills) and writing test (that includes reading and writing skills). The speaking test is conducted by the schools themselves whereas the writing test is externally controlled by the National Exam Board, a constituent organization of the Ministry of Education in Nepal.

However, almost no research has explored the impacts of the examination on students' motivation to learn English, excluding Dawadi (2018). Dawadi's research also does not record the voices of students as the data in her study was collected only from teachers. It is worth noting that if the impacts of a high-stakes test is not known, this might bring undesirable consequences to the society (Messick, 1998). It is potentially like "a police force without a court system, unfair and dangerous" (McNamara, 2007, p.280). Therefore, the rationale for this study begins with the need to explore the impacts of the SEE English test on students. However, it should be noted that this is a part of a research study that has explored a number of other issues related to the impacts of the SEE English test on students and their parents.

Literature on language assessment indicates that the studies using students' diaries and a longitudinal survey (a mixed methods approach) to explore the impact of a test on students are rare. This study, instead of capturing a snapshot of test preparation, followed the SEE candidates for several months, covering the whole process from initial preparation to receiving the test results to studying in a higher Grade. Characteristic of this study was to look at the test impacts and the test process from the students' perspective and to give them a voice, rather than writing about them. Thus, this study seeks to make a methodological contribution to the existing research. A second potential contribution is to add more evidence of the test impacts on students. In terms of application, it can contribute to the improvement of the test and better inform teachers and policy makers about the nature of high-stakes test impacts on students and their parents.

Test impact on student motivation

Motivation has been defined as a person's desire or drive to perform a particular task. It is usually considered to be one of the most important determinants of students' success in high-stakes tests. However, it is a hugely complex phenomenon. Gardner (1985) defines

motivation as the extent to which an individual learner exerts effort to learn a language because of his or her desire to do so and the satisfaction derived from the task. Dörnyei (2005), a renowned figure in L2 motivation studies, considers motivation as one of the major factors that not only stimulates learners to initiate L2 learning but also equips them with the subsequent driving force to maintain the demanding and laborious L2 learning process.

However, Ryan and Deci (2000) argue that as motivation is hardly a unitary concept, people vary not only in terms of the degree of motivation but also in the orientation (type) of motivation. Eccles and Wigfield (2002) present several motivation theories based on reasons for engagement in tasks (e.g., intrinsic motivation theory, flow theory, self-determination theory, and goals theory); theories that integrate expectancy and value constructs (e.g., self-worth theory, expectancy-value theory, and attribution theory); and theories that focus on integrating motivation and cognition (e.g., theories of motivation and volition, and theories of self-regulation and motivation). A full discussion of those theories is beyond the capacity of this paper.

As the main concern of the current study is on whether or not the SEE English test motivates students to learn the English language, it focuses more on the self-determination theory (SDT) of motivation which mainly focuses on human beings' natural tendencies to behave in an effective way (Cheng et al., 2014). SDT was first developed by Richard M. Ryan and Edward L. Deci who later developed the notions of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT, depending on the degree of self-determination, puts human motivation on a continuum ranging from amotivation (the state of lacking willingness to act) to passive compliance (i.e. controlled forms of extrinsic motivation) to active personal commitment (i.e. intrinsic motivation) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In a high-stakes test context, "motivation to succeed is not static, but occurs along a continuum. In particular, motivation varies according to the complex interaction of test-takers and test contexts based on both the intended and unintended test use" (Cheng, et al., 2014, p.306). However, Ryan and Brown (2005) claim that high-stakes testing policies are mostly developed based on the notion that punishments, rewards and self-esteem-based pressures function as effective motivators for learning. It is usually believed that tests provide incentives to test-takers to improve their performances. Nonetheless, tests might be more motivating for those test-takers who expect success.

Gardner (2001) uses the terms 'integrative' and 'instrumental' to classify motivation. The term 'integrative' is synonymous to intrinsic motivation and instrumental to extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to the context when a person is doing something as s/he finds it inherently interesting or enjoyable, whereas extrinsic motivation refers to the context when the person is performing an action as s/he thinks that learning will be beneficial for future career (Ryan & Deci, 2000). An intrinsically motivated person shows interest in learning about the people of the target language and their culture and engages in an activity and also enjoys learning the language (Gardner, 2001). However, an instrumentally or extrinsically motivated learner has more pragmatic considerations or instrumental purpose for L2 learning, such as getting a reward, earning money or obtaining a job. Learning for a test is generally regarded as instrumental, which is normally an extrinsic motive for students (Zhan & Andrews, 2014).

Kwon, Lee & Shin (2017) and Choi (2008), based on their research in the Korean context, argue that tests lead to low intrinsic motivation in students as most students' drive and motivation for learning is closely linked to instrumental motivation such as getting admission in a good university.

Testing researchers seem to hold different views regarding test motivation. For instance, Hsu (2009) argues that students in high-stakes test contexts are less likely to hold positive attitudes towards learning as the performances in those tests are likely to determine their career or lives. Additionally, Tsai and Tsou (2009) claim that high-stakes tests lead to a decrease in motivation to learn English as classes are test-oriented, enhancing only test-taking skills instead of developing communicative competence. However, Abu-Alhija (2007) opines that large-scale tests in some contexts may motivate students to work harder and more effectively. Some previous washback studies (e.g. Dawadi, 2018; Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman, 1996) also claim that high-stakes English tests are a strong instrumental motivation for students to learn English. However, very little is known about the impacts of the SEE English test on students' motivation to learn English. Therefore, this study aims to explore how the test affects students' motivation to learn both in the pre-test and post-test context.

Participants

The participants of the study included secondary level students (N=247) studying at Grade 10 in public schools in Nepal. They were 14 to 16 years old and they had learned English for 10 years. All of them were Nepali native speakers and had learnt English as a foreign language. They were preparing for the SEE at the beginning phase of this research project but they were studying at Grade 11 during the final phase of the data collection.

Research ethics

The institutional code of practice for research and British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (2018) were followed to maintain the ethics in this study. Both students and parents were given a full account of the project before they took part in the study. They were informed that their participation in this study was voluntary and that all data would be treated as confidential and anonymised promptly. Parents' consent was obtained before students took part in this study.

Data Collection

This study featured a mixed method design comprising a longitudinal survey, oral diaries and interviews. The first questionnaire survey was carried out about six weeks before the students sat for the SEE and the second survey was conducted two months after the SEE results publication. It should be noted that the number of respondents in the pre-test survey was 247, whereas it was 226 in the post-test survey. Additionally, six case study students were asked to

record weekly oral diaries for three months: first during the usual classes (i.e. in the fifth month of their academic year), second during the test preparation (in the ninth month of the academic year) and the final one around the test results (i.e., they started to record their diaries one week before the test results and continued for four weeks). Furthermore, the case study students were interviewed twice: around six weeks before the SEE and two months after the SEE result publication. Considering the English language proficiency of the participants, only the Nepali language was used for the data collection.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS version 20 and frequency distributions were calculated for each item included in the questionnaire. In some cases, central tendency statistics (i.e. mean percentage) has been reported to indicate an overall picture of the students' views on the nature of the test impacts. In order to analyse qualitative data, NVivo 10 was used and a thematic analysis approach was employed. Thus, qualitative data analysis was an iterative process which included several readings and rereading of the transcribed texts.

FINDINGS

Before presenting the findings, it is worth pointing out that each case study student and parent is represented with the alphabets 'S' and 'P' respectively, followed by a number 1 to 6 to ensure confidentiality in this research. The same number is used to represent a student and his/her parent. For instance, P1 means only the parent of S1 and P2 means only the parent of S2 and so on.

The study explored both the pre-test and post-test motivation to learn English. Therefore, students were asked to respond to the same question in both the surveys and similar questions were asked in both the pre-test and post-test interviews. Students' responses to the questionnaires are summarised in Figure 1 which indicates that the majority of students (79%) were motivated to learn English in the pre-test context. However, there was a sharp decrease in the number of students who were motivated to learn English in the post-test context. Only 30% students were motivated to learn English and slightly more than half of the students (52%) were even discouraged from learning English in the post-test context. Nevertheless, there was no effect of the test on some students, both in the pre-test and post-test contexts.

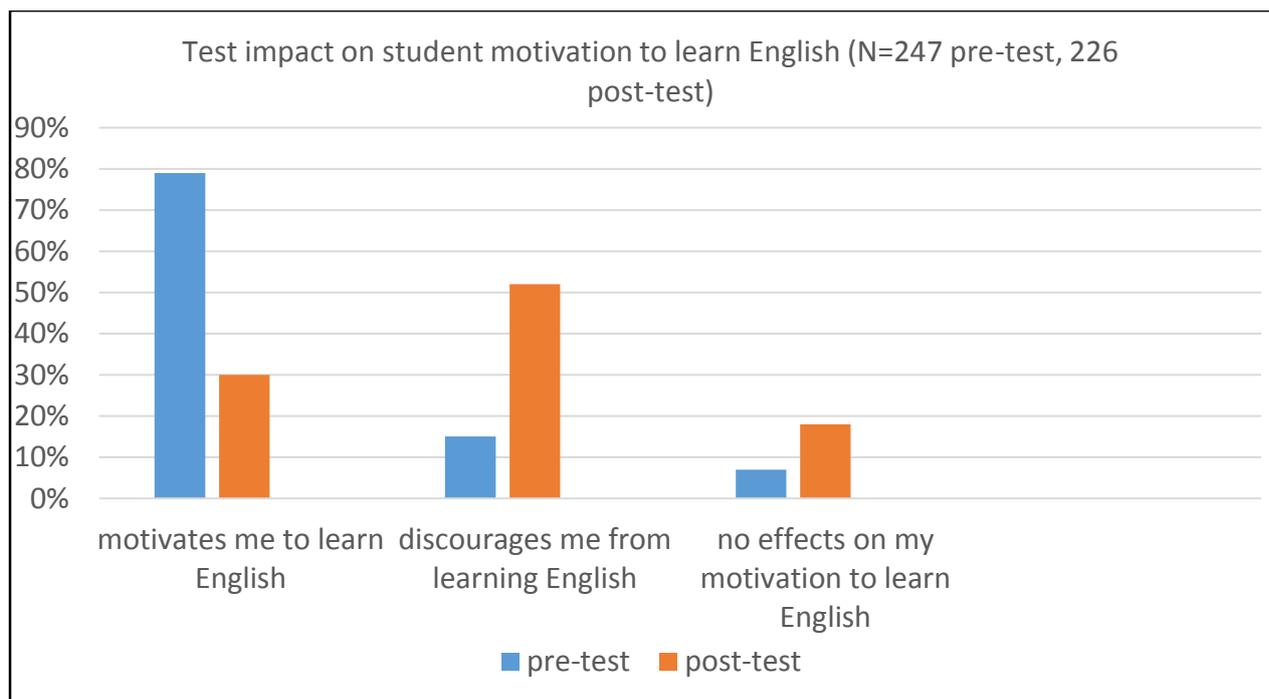


Figure 1: Test impact on student motivation to learn English

With regard to the pre-test motivation to learn English, the quantitative results were well supported by the qualitative findings. Test motivation for learning English was one of the most frequently occurring sub-themes in the qualitative data analysis. Most of the pre-test diaries indicated that the students were motivated to learn English and do well on the test: “*Last week, I was motivated to learn English as I knew that the SEE is very important for my future*” (S3); “*I am really interested in learning English these days as the SEE is coming soon. I know that the SEE is very important for me. I must try my best to do well on the test*” (S1). Additionally, all the parents, during their pre-test interviews, reported that the test motivated their children to learn English: “*I think, she is more motivated to learn English this year because of the SEE*” (P1). Furthermore, all the case study students reported that their parents would motivate them to learn English and work hard for the test: “*My mother always encourages me to learn English*” (S5).

Interestingly, it was also found that one of the case study students (S5), who did not like the English subject before she started to study at Grade 10, got interest in it and also had a sense of achievement when she prepared for the SEE English test.

When I was at Grade 9, I was never interested in learning English as I found the subject very difficult. This year, I am a bit more interested in this subject. I started to take tuition classes right after I began to study at Grade 10. I spent more time for this subject. Now, I have somehow learnt English and also performed better in our class tests. I have realised that English is not a very difficult subject, if we work hard (S5).

The findings indicated that there were two main reasons for their motivation to do well on the test: they had a plan to continue their study after the SEE and wished to study in a good higher secondary school or college of their choice:

I am very much motivated to learn English because I need to do well on the test to be eligible to continue my study. Also, I need to get minimum C+ grade on the test to be eligible to study science at Grade 11(S3).

I want to work hard for the test as I want to study in a good higher secondary school in Kathmandu (S3).

I know that good colleges enrol only the students who have got good Grade on the test (S1).

The findings further indicated that the students had a belief that doing well on the test would support them to find a job in future: *“If I do well on the test, it helps me to find a good job in future”* (S5). Thus, the test use seems to be one of the motivating factors for them.

Interestingly, two of the students (S4, S6) were also interested in learning about English people and their culture: *“I am interested in learning about English people and their culture.”* (S6).

The diaries also indicated that doing well on their class tests would sometimes be a source of motivation for them: *“Last week, I was really interested in learning English because I got good scores in our class test. My teacher praised me in front of my classmates that made me feel proud”* (S4). Conversely, not being able to perform well on those tests would discourage them from learning English: *“I performed poorly on the test last week. So, I was just worried and could not study much”* (S2).

With regard to the post-test motivation, it might be logical to divide it into two sections on the basis of the timing (i.e. before and after the test results publication). It should be noted that the quantitative data presented in Figure 1 represents only post-result motivation.

The quantitative finding that just above half of the surveyed students (52%) were discouraged from learning English after the test results publication. The findings were supported by the qualitative findings. Three of the case study students reported that the test results discouraged them from learning English: *“I am really discouraged from leaning English these days. I really feel bad as I could not get my expected Grades”* (S1); *“I am very much discouraged from learning English now. I am particularly not happy with my grade on the speaking test. I do not think that the test was fair-S3).*

Nevertheless, rest of the students reported that they were more motivated to lean English because of the test results: *“With a great surprise, I got better grades than I had expected. I feel proud and more motivated to learn English now”* (S4); *“The test results have really encouraged me to work hard”* (S5).

The findings related to S2 were more interesting. She was motivated to learn English during the first phase of diary recording, then she was discouraged from learning English when the test grew closer mainly because of the perceived difficulty of the test:

English is the most difficult subject for me. Although I try my best, I cannot get good scores on our class tests. I have heard that the SEE will be more difficult than our class tests. Therefore, I sometimes feel really discouraged from learning English (S2).

She was again motivated to learn English after the test results as she obtained higher Grade than her expectation: *“I got higher Grade on my speaking test that made me happy and also encouraged me to lean English” (S2)*. Indeed, the excerpt indicates that successful performance on the test became a motivating factor to learn English after the results.

The diaries recorded just one week before the test result indicated that three students were learning English during the time. Among them two students were living in a city and preparing for their college entrance exam as both of them had a plan to apply for a reputed college in a city. They were also taking a bridge course and trying to develop their language skills: *“I spent the whole week in reading and writing as I had to go through a very tough competition to get admission in a good college” (S1); “I also practised speaking English with my friends in my bridge course” (S3)*.

However, their interviews suggested that their motivation to develop language skills was triggered by the format of the college entrance exam that would include a large sample of writing such as essay writing, report writing and letter writing, as indicated by the following excerpt:

I basically tried hard to develop my writing skills during the time as I knew that there would be different kinds of free writing questions in our college entrance test (S1).

An additional factor of their motivation was the medium of instruction at Grade 11:

All the subjects are taught in English at Grade 11. Therefore, I tried my best to develop my speaking skills as I had not practised it before (S3).

Nevertheless, three other students did almost nothing in English during the time, except occasionally listening to English songs: *“I have done nothing in English after I took the test. I will restart learning it after I begin to study at Grade 11” (S5)*.

To sum up, having brought both the quantitative and qualitative data together, this section has produced a comprehensive picture of the impacts of the test on students' motivation. The quantitative results were well supported by qualitative findings, and vice versa. Students' diaries and interviews provided further explanations for the reasons of their motivation. Indeed, students' diaries have beautifully captured how students' motivation level kept changing during different stages of the academic year. In other words, had the students not been asked to record their diaries, it would not have been possible to capture students' motivation level through the pre-test context to the post-test context to the post-results context.

DISCUSSION

With regard to the pre-test motivation to learn English, the findings of the study indicate that the students perceived the test impact as more positive than negative. These findings are

consistent with the findings of previous washback studies (e.g. Dawadi, 2018; Gu, 2005; Huang, 2010; Li, et al. 2012; Takagi, 2010) that taking or preparing for a high-stakes EFL test usually motivates students to learn English.

There could be possibly two reasons behind students' motivation to learn English in the pre-test context. First, the test results are used as a gateway to higher education and also a criterion for subject selection in higher secondary education. This test policy seems to be effective to motivate students. Second, the SEE English test results may affect their chances to study in the higher secondary schools/colleges of their choices and to find a job.

Indeed, previous research also indicates that students who consider a test to be important for them tend to study hard for it (Allen, 2016; Cheng, 1997; Chu et al., 2014). In other words, if students know that their test performance will have significant effects on their career goals, it is more likely that they expend greater efforts to perform well on the test.

The findings emerged through the qualitative data collected from S2 (that she was discouraged from learning English when the test grew closer mainly because of the perceived difficulty of the test but she was again motivated to learn English after she got good results in the SEE) provide further evidence to the claim that assessment can motivate students when results are good (Xiao & Carless, 2013). Additionally, the findings might indicate that students' motivation level does not remain constant and they lose interest in learning if they perceive a test to be very difficult for them.

Contrary to Shohamy, et al.'s (1996) claim that high-stakes EFL test-takers' motivation to learn English significantly decreases after the test administration, half of the case study students (i.e., three out of six) in the current study were still motivated to learn English. They were actively learning English in the post-test context (i.e. about three months when they were waiting for the test results) and trying their best to develop their language skills. However, college entrance exam, rather than the SEE English test, seemed to be the key motivating factor for them to learn English during the time. It can be assumed that if they were not supposed to take the exam, they might not have been motivated to learn English during the time. However, a few students were discouraged from learning English in the post-test context as they did not get their expected grade on the test. This means, they did not think that the test was fair.

It is also worth noting that four of the case study students in this study were instrumentally motivated to learn English. Very similar to Greek students (Tzagiri, 2006), incentive values and instrumental benefits were a stronger motivation for learning English than their interest in learning about cultural artefacts, such as English movies, books, newspapers and magazines, or learning about English speakers and their culture. More specifically, the main reason for their motivation was that English would help them to make their future bright due to its importance, popularity and usefulness in the Nepalese context. However, the rest of the students were intrinsically motivated to learn English.

As reported by Tzagiri (2006), the initial driving force of their motivation to learn English seemed to be influenced by the social milieu, especially their parents. All the case study students reported that their parents motivated them to learn English. The general perception

that there is a great role of family in motivating Asian students (Life, 2011) is well supported by this study.

No matter what the source of motivation was for the SEE students, what was more important for this study was that the students were highly motivated to perform well on the test. It seemed that the SEE was perceived as a goal which gave them a direction for promoting their learning. Studying for the SEE also seemed to help students develop good learning habits, such as getting up early and doing homework every day.

To sum up, students' motivation level does not remain constant; generally it was stronger in the pre-test context than in the post-test context. The main reason behind this could be that the reward for the students who succeed in the SEE is potentially very positive, with some very attractive career and life-altering possibilities.

Limitations of the study

The study has revealed interesting findings regarding the impacts of the SEE English test on student motivation to learn English. However, the results of this study should be treated with caution and future investigation should try to overcome the limitations of this study. To be more specific, the study has three major limitations. The first limitation of the study concerns its sample size. It was limited to 247 students and six parents in Nepal. Therefore, generalisation of the findings is limited by this constraint.

The second limitation of this study is from a methodological point of view. This study was limited to the data collected from students and their parents, but it would have been benefited more from the data collected from schools or from teachers. Finally, all the participants in this study were selected only from public schools but around 20% students in Nepal study in private schools. Therefore, this study cannot represent the voices of private school students. This study, however, is one of the few test impact studies that has explored the impacts of a high-stakes test on students both in the pre-test and post-test contexts.

Implications of the Study

There are two major implications of the study. Firstly, the findings of the study indicated that students were motivated to learn English in the pre-test context. However, they were discouraged from learning English in the post-test context. There were several indications that one of the main reasons of their discouragement was the test fairness. This means, some of the students did not believe that the test (particularly speaking test) was fair and could accurately measure their language skills. Thus, a due attention need be paid on the test design. Secondly, the finding of the study that students' motivation to learn the English did not remain constant might encourage test impact researchers to carry out a longitudinal study rather than limiting their studies to test preparation phase.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study collected data only from students and their parents. However, it would have been definitely helpful to know about teachers' views. Had the data from teachers been obtained, it might have helped to clarify several ambiguities emerged in this data that would produce a more comprehensive picture. Thus, this argument highlights that methodological triangulation in test impact research like this is crucial. It is hoped that future research takes care of such issues and includes methodological triangulation to create more comprehensive picture of the test impacts. Furthermore, this study was limited to public school students and their parents from a remote part of Nepal. Therefore, it is recommended that future research includes students from both private and public schools and also from city areas.

While reviewing literature for this study, it was found that almost all the previous test impact studies (excluding Loumbour, 2014) observed only the pre-test impacts of high-stakes tests on students. However, this study has revealed that a test can affect students' motivation to learn both in pre-test and post-test contexts and such impact does not remain constant. Therefore, it is recommended that future research is not limited to the test preparation and explores both the pre-test and post-test impacts of a high-stakes test on students.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the impacts of the SEE English test on students' motivation to learn English. The data generated through multiple sources indicate that the test had considerable impact on students' motivation to learn English both in the pre-test and post-test context; pre-test impact was more positive than post-test impact. Although the test motivated a large number of students in the pre-test context, more than half of the students were discouraged from learning English in the post-test context. One of the main reasons behind students' dissatisfaction was that they did not find the test as fair as they expected. Thus, this study has raised several questions about the reliability and validity of the test. Having collected both students' and their parents' views about the SEE, this study has illuminated the areas which are not fully explored.

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