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The Washback Effect of the High-Stakes English Baccalaureate Exam in Tunisia: Test Preparation Beliefs and Practices

Asma Maaoui
Amel Jarraya
Hanen Dammak

University of Tunis

Outline

- **Theoretical Background**
- **Methodology**
- **Results and Discussion**
- **Conclusions**

Theoretical Background

- Washback research has revealed that instructional beliefs and practices can be influenced by high-stakes tests whereby accountability drives “teaching to the test” (Popham, 2001);
- This is generally marked by a focus on test content and question types (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006) at the expense of real learning in language classes;
- These practices do not promote learning oriented activities, but rather focus on coaching students on question types represented on the test (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006).

Test Preparation Practices

Test preparation practices include activities such as:

- familiarizing students with test format;
- acquainting them with items included on the test;
- providing training on time management skills (Welsh, Eastwood, & D'Agostino, 2014) **which are perceived as positive.**

However, **negative washback** and unhealthy test preparation practices entail:

- **teaching to the test** (Crocker, 2005, 2006; Plakans & Gebril, 2015)
- **test wiseness** (Cohen, 2006; 2013).

Test Preparation Effects

Research has revealed a number of negative effects of tests on instruction, including:

- more test-related activities at the expense of instructional time (Smith, 1991);
- a narrower curriculum scope;
- less creativity on the part of teachers;
- more emphasis on teaching to the test rather than on didactic teaching (Cheng, Watanabe, & Curtis, 2004; Smith, 1991; Xiao, 2014; Xie, 2015; Zhan & Andrews, 2014).

Test Preparation Beliefs

Washback research has revealed that:

- teachers' perceptions vary (Lai & Waltman , 2008);
- teachers tend to disagree (Moore, 1994; Gebril & Eid, 2017);
- personal and contextual factors may interact with teachers' perceptions (Lai & Waltman, 2008; Tsagari, 2016);
- teacher self-efficacy may affect test preparation practices (Jäger et al., 2012);
- self-efficacy can shape teachers' beliefs positively (Gebrill & Eid, 2017).

Research problem

- A dearth of washback research has included data from different assessment stakeholders;
- Little is known about the washback effect of the baccalaureate exam in Tunisia;
- A scarcity of assessment research has addressed teacher beliefs and practices in the local context.

Theoretical framework (Gebril & Eid, 2017)

1. Test preparation practices
2. Teachers' beliefs
 - The appropriateness of different test preparation practices;
 - Self-efficacy about test preparation.

The Assessment Context in Tunisia

- Students in Tunisian schools study English starting from Grade 6 of primary schools;
- The educational system relies heavily on summative assessment;
- The Tunisian educational system can be described as dominated by “examination orientation and ritualization” (Hargreaves,1997);
- To have access to higher education studies, students must all pass the baccalaureate exam.

The Baccalaureate Exam of English

- Created as the French Baccalauréat in Tunisia in 1891, this exam is controlled and administered nationwide by the Ministry of Education;
- It comes as a culmination of secondary education following a national curriculum where teachers use the same textbook (with a focus on the four skills);
- Speaking and listening are part of the curriculum but they are excluded from this high-stakes exam because of practicality constraints.

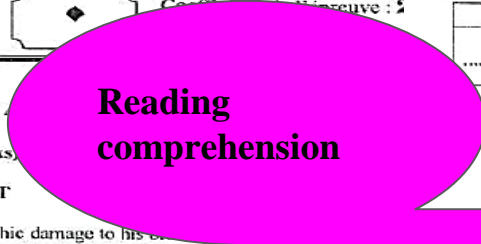
RÉPUBLIQUE TUNISIENNE
 MINISTÈRE DE L'ÉDUCATION

 EXAMEN DU BACCALAURÉAT
 SESSION 2018

Session principale

Épreuve : **ANGLAIS** Section : **Lettres**

Durée : **2h**



Le sujet comporte :

I. READING COMPREHENSION (15 marks)

THE TEXT

- Ⓐ Arthur Bamsey, 82, has been left with catastrophic damage to his car whose driver was distracted by his mobile. Guilty motorist Ryan Niner, 19, was trying to ring his mother as he drove his car through a Welsh town centre, and hit the pensioner who was trying to cross the road. His car struck Bamsey and sent the elderly man flying into the air, before landing on his head, causing serious and life-changing injuries.
- Ⓑ The teenager, who was 18 when the accident happened, was trying to call his mum but went straight to voicemail. Just seconds later, he drove straight into Bamsey, who was on his way from home to pick up cakes and the morning newspaper. Passers-by, including an off-duty nurse, ran to his aid and called for an ambulance.
- Ⓒ The former steelworker spent five months in intensive care at the University Hospital of Wales before being transferred to Neath Port Talbot Hospital. Bamsey is now barely able to communicate and requires a tube to be fed. But his family are hopeful that he will ultimately come home. He is able to leave his hospital room for a few minutes, but he needs help with most of his personal care.
- Ⓓ Judge Paul Thomas said drivers who used their mobile phones at the wheel were a 'public menace'. He told Niner: "You would have had ample time to see the pedestrian crossing the road ahead of you had you not been distracted." Niner was sentenced to 20 months in a young offenders' institution, and banned from driving for two years.
- Ⓔ Paul Jones, from South Wales Police, said Bamsey's family's lives had been 'changed forever.' He said: "Talking on the phone while driving is one of the main contributory factors in all road collisions. With the increase in mobile technology and social media, it is believed that a third of all motorists text, make a call or access social media while driving. We would ask all drivers to consider their actions and the consequences of the choices which they make - the only safe option is to turn your phone off and put it out of sight."

Adapted from *the Daily Mail*
 December 3, 2016

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Complete the table with information from paragraphs 1 and 4. (3 marks)

A driver hit an elderly man

Cause of the accident	Decision of the court
.....	a.
.....	b.

For each of the following statements, pick out ONE detail showing that it is false. (3 marks)

- a) Nobody helped the victim after the accident. (Paragraph 2)

 - b) Everybody was sure that Arthur had no chance to leave the hospital. (Paragraph 3)

 - c) Using mobile phones at the wheel is a minor cause of road accidents. (Paragraph 5)

3. Focus on paragraph 3 and pick out three (3) details describing the victim's bad state at present. (3 marks)
- a.
 - b.
 - c.
4. Tick (✓) the correct alternative. (3 marks)
- a. The accident happened in 2014 2015 2016
 - b. 'off-duty' (Paragraph 2) nearly means
 not working at present quite busy as usual not doing the job properly
 - c. 'ample' (Paragraph 4) nearly means
 hard enough spare
5. What do the words underlined in the text refer to? (2 marks)
- a) 'the pensioner' (Paragraph 1) refers to
 - b) 'We' (Paragraph 5) refers to
6. Give a personal and justified answer to the following question. (1 mark)
- Should drivers like Ryan Niner be severely punished? Why? Why not?
- I think that such drivers be severely punished because

II. WRITING (15 marks)

1. Use the table below to write a coherent 5-line report about **The School Food Plan**. (5 marks)

Launching date of the plan	September 2014
Purpose	provide nutritious meals
Beneficiaries	55,000 infant pupils / 350 schools in England
Effects on the pupils	higher attendance / more concentration in class / better communication / less violent behaviour
Parents' attitude	Approve / support / ready to contribute

Writing

2. You have just read on a news website that a 64-year-old Tunisian has passed her baccalaureate exam.

Write a 12-line article for your school magazine in which you discuss the benefits of pursuing studies at an advanced age. Support your ideas with sound arguments. (10 marks)

Language

III. LANGUAGE (10 marks)

1. Fill in the blanks with seven (7) words from the list below (3,5 marks)

launched – on – access – granted – aims – to – tirelessly – scheduled - hardly

Have you ever dreamt of having a vacation on the moon? Well, a dream of a trip to the moon is just a dream until it turns into a reality soon. According to reports, the Moon Express – a company that aims to bring people from the Earth to the Moon in terms of a vacation – has been granted permission by the US law to leave the Earth and land on the moon. Moon Express is a privately owned company with such great ambitions. The company is offering a trip to the moon for more than \$150,000,000, and the trip is scheduled for 2026. Rishabh Jain, the mastermind behind the company, and his team have been working tirelessly to convert this dream of many into a reality. Based on another report in JPL Science, the trip will start by being launched from the Soyuz rocket from Russia and will drop by the International Space Station (ISS) before officially making it to the moon.

2. Put the bracketed words in the right tense and / or form: (3 marks)

It has been the dream of retirees for thousands of years to settle in the countryside where the air is cleaner and the life is quieter and (healthy) . These days, thanks to technological advances, growing numbers of professionals (choose) to retire themselves in the countryside, not to retire but because in many industries there is simply no room to be chained to a desk in the city. Having a broadband connection and choosing a phone or a laptop is all that (require) . According to UK statistics, there is some evidence to theory that your life (expect) increases in the countryside. Living in rural areas means you are slightly less likely to die (premature) from stroke or coronary heart disease. Lately, government forecasters (predict) that, on average, people born in very rural areas will live 1.5 to 2 years longer than those in major urban areas.

3. Circle the correct option.(3,5 marks)

Parents in Armenia start thinking about their children's careers at a very young age – around six months or so. When an infant's first tooth (arrives / arrived / will arrive), typically between the age of four and seven months, a celebration takes place. As part of the ritual, objects (symbolize / symbolizing / symbolic) different professions are arrayed in front of a child: a microphone for an entertainer, a stethoscope for a doctor, scissors for a tailor or money for a banker. (However / No matter / Whichever) object the baby chooses first is thought to be a sign of where the child's professional aptitude lies. Parents are free to add (with / to / for) or omit from the mix as they wish. "Parents may orchestrate the future life of their (offspring / siblings / relatives) by choosing only those objects that symbolize prestigious and desired professions," Professor Antonyan said. Parents (should / must / can) also game the selection by positioning objects nearer to or farther from their infant's (reach / achievement / desire). At one recent ceremony, the father of the baby asked to place a ladle a bit far from his daughter to save her from a destiny of a housewife.

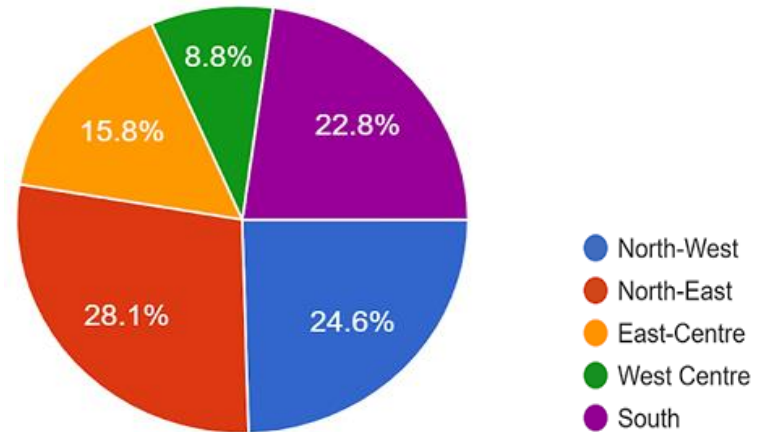
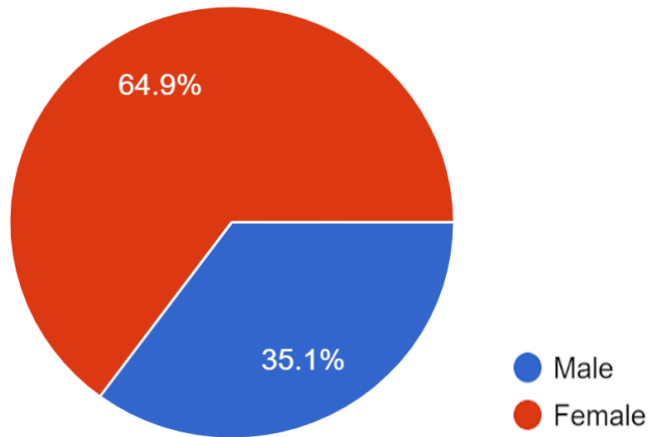
Research Questions

1. What are baccalaureate Tunisian teachers' English exam preparation beliefs?
2. What test preparation practices do these teachers report using with their Fourth Form learners?
3. What do teacher trainers report about test preparation practices in English language classrooms?
4. What beliefs do they have about such practices?

Methodology

Questionnaire
(Adapted from Gebril & Eid, 2017)

- **Secondary school teachers** (N=150) of English to Fourth Form learners
- 52,6% had more than 16 years of teaching experience

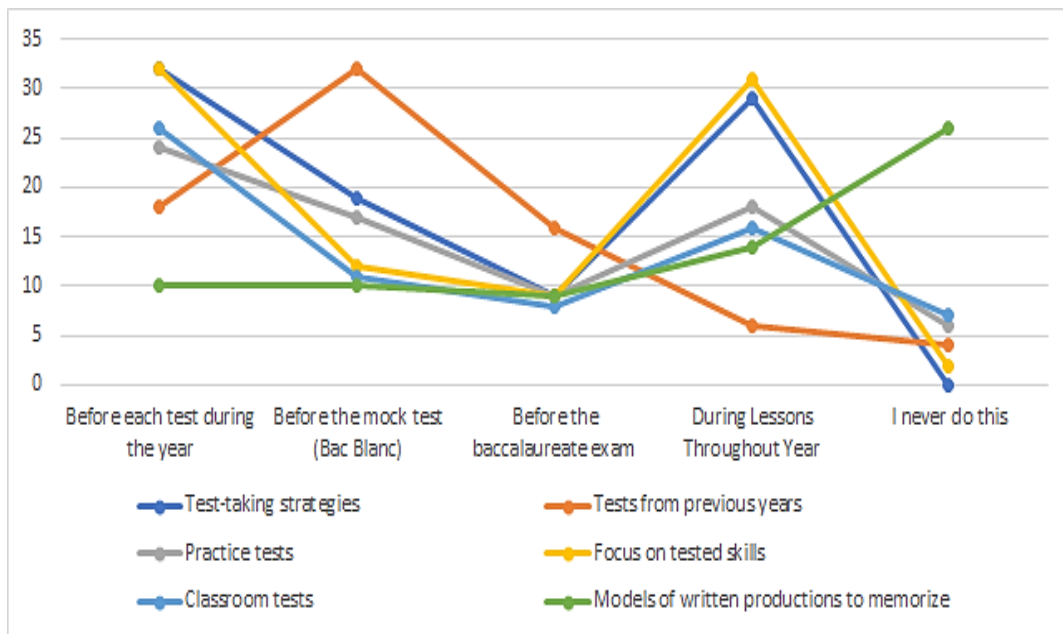


Semi-Structured Interviews **(Gebrill & Eid 2017)**

- Four teacher trainers appointed by the Ministry of Education
- Two males and two females from different regions of the country

Results and Discussion

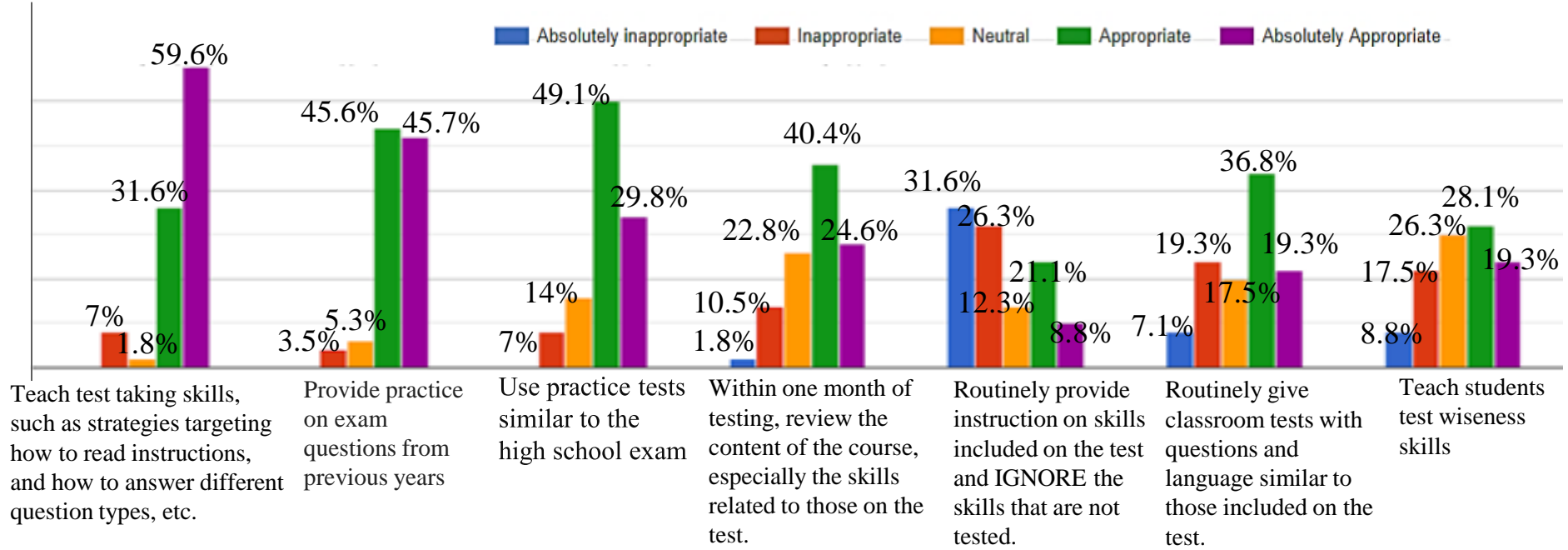
Test preparation activities



The questionnaire results revealed the teachers’:

- Continuous use of test preparation activities during the entire school year;
- use of tests from previous years;
- training of their learners in TTS use particularly towards the end of the school year (i.e., before the mock exam);
- A focus on tested skills during lessons throughout the year.

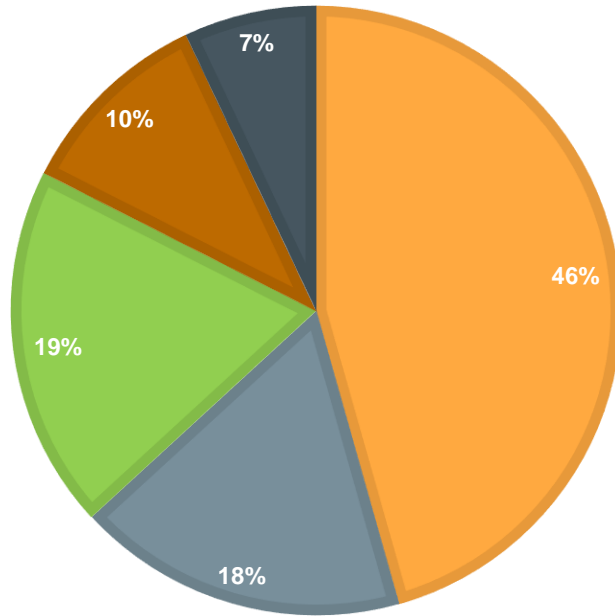
The Appropriateness of Test Preparation Practices



- These teachers generally considered test preparation practices as appropriate;
- However, they found “routinely provide instruction on skills included on the test and ignore the skills that are not tested” rather inappropriate while about half of them considered test wiseness as appropriate;
- Almost half of the teachers indicated that teaching test-wiseness strategies is appropriate.

The Ethicality of Test Preparation

- ethical
- unethical
- Some practices are unethical
- ethical but
- unable to answer



Almost half of the teachers considered test preparation practices ethical and about 18% of them thought they were ethical but with reservation.

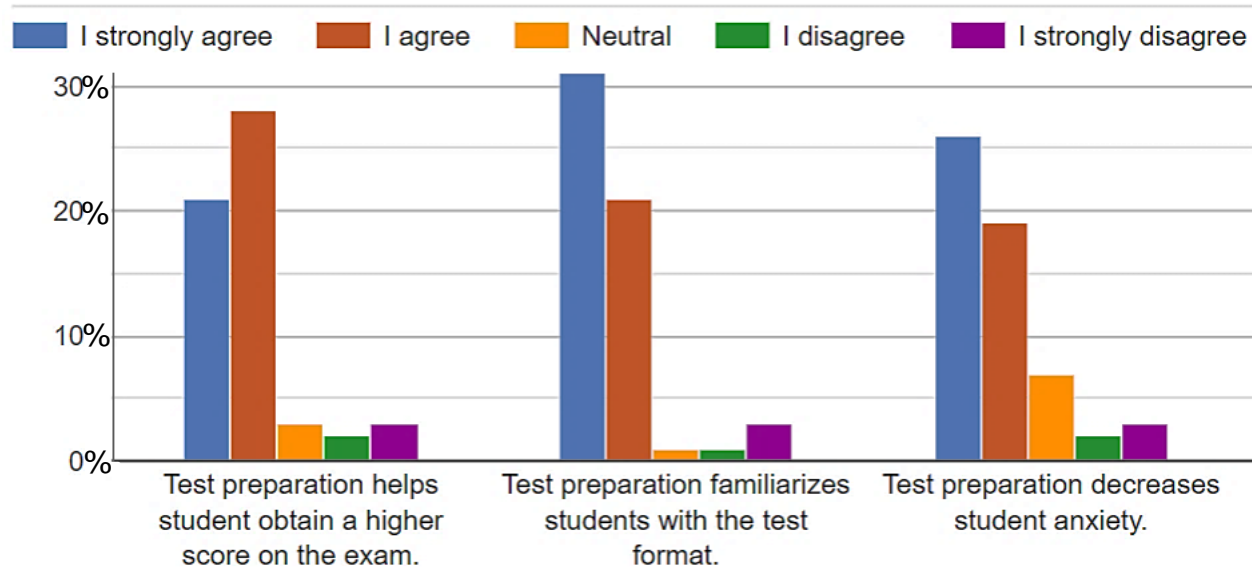
The Teachers' Justification of these Practices

High Achievement	Yes they are helpful
	As long as the test preparation is for the good of the student I don't see anything unethical about it.
	Yes, I think so because ,after all, students' eventual aim is to get good marks in the subject which permits them to obtain a high score .
	Yes, they are since they help my students succeed in the end
	All preparations are acceptable if they are beneficial to learners
	Yes they are since they are helpful to students
	Yes they are as long as they help students succeed . All of them are useful

TTS	They are acceptable since they help learners revise and apply what they have seen before in the course
	Test preparation practices give learners the benefit of past testing experiences . These practices are supposed to train learners in the field of problem solving skills and to raise learners' awareness about the pitfalls to avoid while answering exam questions . So, of course, they are ethically acceptable.
	yes, the pupils won't get bad surprises from on the day of the exam. They must be prepared for all types of questions... It is essential that our students be familiar with exams
TTS/ Emotional Preparedness	Test preparation practices are acceptable because they help students acquire the right skills and decrease their anxiety
	It is always useful to prepare students mentally and through practising skills

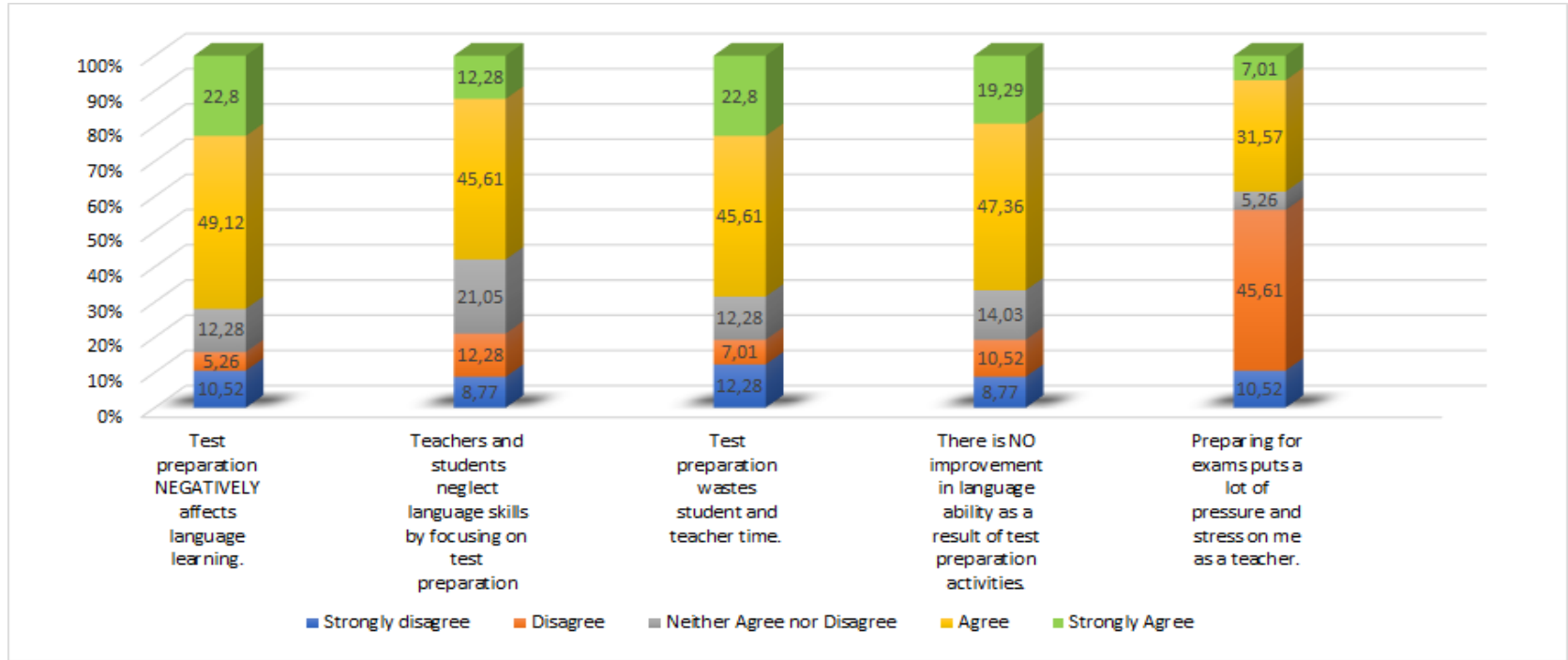
<p>TTS/ High Achievement</p>	<p>Any test preparation practice [...] answers students' needs and supports them to become active and independent learners.</p>
<p>TTS/ Skills</p>	<p>Yes, indeed most of our students expect some revision periods allocated to activities related to test preparation just before exams. They want to know all about the tricks expected in the Final Exams. It is a golden opportunity for my students to ask many detailed questions and feel free to modify their varied questions related to the many types of practice whether comprehension, grammar or writing skills activities; the more they practise the better.</p>

Exam Preparation Beliefs

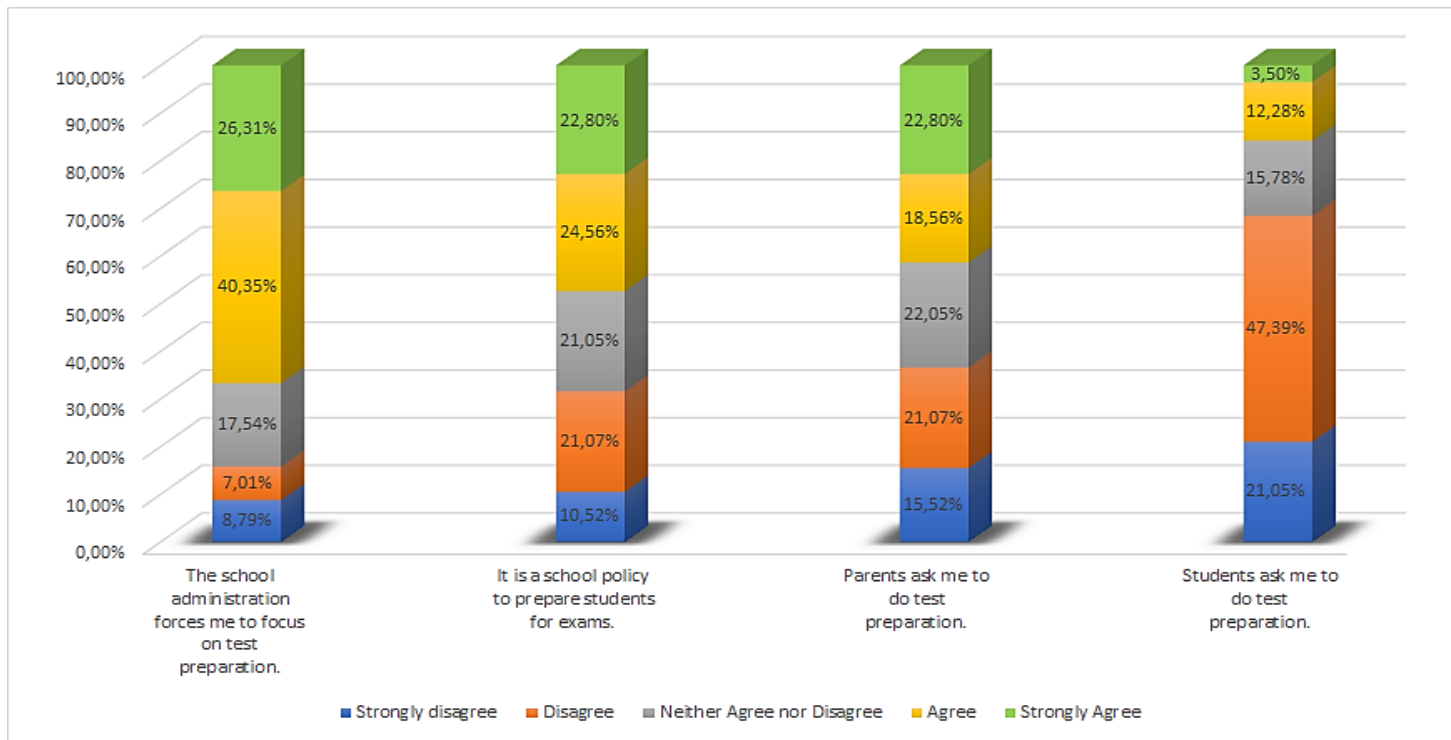


The majority of these Tunisian Bacallaureate teachers believe that test preparation helps students obtain higher scores on the exam, familiarizes them with the test format and decreases their anxiety.

Teacher Self-Efficacy in the Area of Test Preparation



This figure clearly shows that the majority of these teachers showed an awareness of the controversial nature of test preparation but found such practices unstressful for them as teachers



The majority of these teachers also agreed that the school administration exerts pressure on them to focus on test preparation and that the school policy required exam preparation. However, there was a lack of consensus among teachers over the role of parents and students in this respect.

Teacher Trainer Opinions about Test Preparation Practices

**Language
(grammar +
vocabulary)**

A focus on “language exercises” (TT1 and TT3)

For TT2, “summarizing grammar points/vocabulary items of one module/use handouts/tasks to be done at home and corrected in class”

Old exams

“old exams” (TT1 and TT2) and “previous bac tests” (TT3) and some tests similar to the final exam

-”summaries of modules” and “revision handouts” (TT1) and “revision sessions” TT2

**Revision
sessions**

**Remedial work and consolidation tasks
(TT4)**

Teacher Trainer Opinions about Test Preparation Implementation

- These teacher trainers also referred to **individual variations at the level of implementation,**
- Such differences are reflected in overt and covert test preparation activities that can aim at developing test wiseness according to TT3;
- One teacher trainer (TT1) revealed that teachers “normally finish the syllabus early then do revision sessions of each module”;
- For two interviewees (TT1 and 3), this is rather done throughout the year;
- The various descriptions identified in the interview data make it possible to describe such test preparation practices as **intended or unintended** depending on the teachers’ decision making process and beliefs.

Overt Test Preparation for the Majority

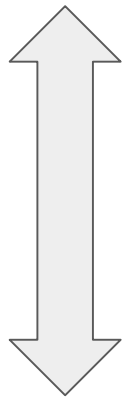
- “Some do it more often than others/ some never do it” (TT3)
- Test wiseness:** “learn some tricks about how to answer” (TT3)
 - Generally, before each test

Covert Test Preparation for a Minority of Teachers

- revision before bac exam” is done implicitly** (TT1)
- This is done rather **covertly** especially before progress and the final exams (TT1 and 3)

- Teachers normally finish the syllabus early then do **revision sessions of each module” TT2**
- This is done throughout the year (TT3 and TT4)

Intended



Unintended

- It is worth emphasizing that three of the trainers (TT1, 2 and 3) explicitly criticized “teaching to the test” in this educational context;
- They said that this would affect the pedagogical process;
- Surprisingly, when asked about the role of teacher training in this regard, only one trainer (TT2) admitted that “teachers [are encouraged] to ask students to do old tests by themselves and ask teachers when they need help”;
- TT4 declared that she helped teachers do so by providing “extra revision material” focusing on the skills tested;
- The interview analysis also revealed **the impact of the system on teacher beliefs and practices** while TT1 described it as “test driven”, the remaining interviewees made reference to external pressure by parents and students.

Teaching to the the Test

“bac teachers forget about their first mission which is teaching and find themselves preparing for the exam” (TT1)

“Teaching falls on what comes in the exam” ending up “teaching to the test” (TT3)

”Teachers normally finish the syllabus early (TT2)

Teacher training: Conflicting views (between trainers and for one trainer)

- do not encourage test preparation (3 out of 4 TTs)
- **there are** discussions of “how to prepare students for the exam” with a focus on **specific types of exercises and how to be selective/ develop writing and reading skills** (TT1)
- “teachers [are encouraged] to ask students to do old tests by themselves and ask teachers when they need help” (TT2)

TT4 admitted doing this and declared that she “designed some kind of **workbook including summary of the modules**” declared that she “shared the digital copy with the secondary schools headmasters via email”

Contextual Factors

Pressure from parents/ school

“Teachers complain about **the lack of time for practice**” and “**time pressure**” and the “**The system is test-driven**” (TT1)

Through **private tutoring** (TT2)

students who are under the pressure of parents pressure teachers (TT3)

It is a personal initiative taken by the teacher (TT4)

As far as the appropriateness and ethicality of test preparation are concerned, the four teacher trainers described such practices as “**inappropriate**”.

However, only TT3 described them as “**very unethical**” and “**unfair**” since this is often practised in private tutoring sessions out of school.

They also referred to the major **negative impact** of:

narrowing down the curriculum + teaching to the test

Appropriateness and Ethicality According to the Teacher Trainers

- The four teacher trainers described such practices as “inappropriate”
- But only TT3 described them as “**very unethical**” and “**unfair**” since this is often practised in private tutoring

Impact on teaching and learning

“What counts first is the test”(TT3)

Some teachers’ discourse would focus mainly on exams

Teachers would say, «this will be in the exam/ this will not » (TT3)

“A major issue when teachers do not focus on listening/ don’t see its usefulness because they won’t be tested on it .Test scores do not reflect learning” (TT2)

TT2 described many Tunisian teachers as “exam worried”

For TT1, “**we are obsessed by the exam**”


For TT3 by doing so teachers “**don’t pay attention to the ones that are not in the exam**”

- For TT1, 2 and 3 this increases the teaching of writing as a product and encourages “students [to] memorize writings” (TT1) and “ready-made essays” (TT2)

- Listening is not taught appropriately (TT2) because it is not in the test

Impact on Teaching

Narrowing down of the Curriculum + Teaching to the Test



Impact on Learning

Test preparation practices usually “come at the expense of real learning of language skills” and have “negative consequences” (TT3)

“after studying English for many years students are unable to write/communicate” (TT1)

“Impact on scores but not on learning” as learners “get used to exam question types”

- This study has revealed that Tunisian teachers' instructional beliefs and practices can be influenced by high-stakes tests whereby accountability drives “teaching to the test” (Popham, 2001).
- This is generally marked by a focus on test content and question types (Higgins, Miller, & Wegmann, 2006) at the expense of real learning in language classes. This confirms the conclusions made by other researchers (e.g., Crocker, 2006; Lai & Waltman, 2008) about the increase of negative washback when the stakes are high.

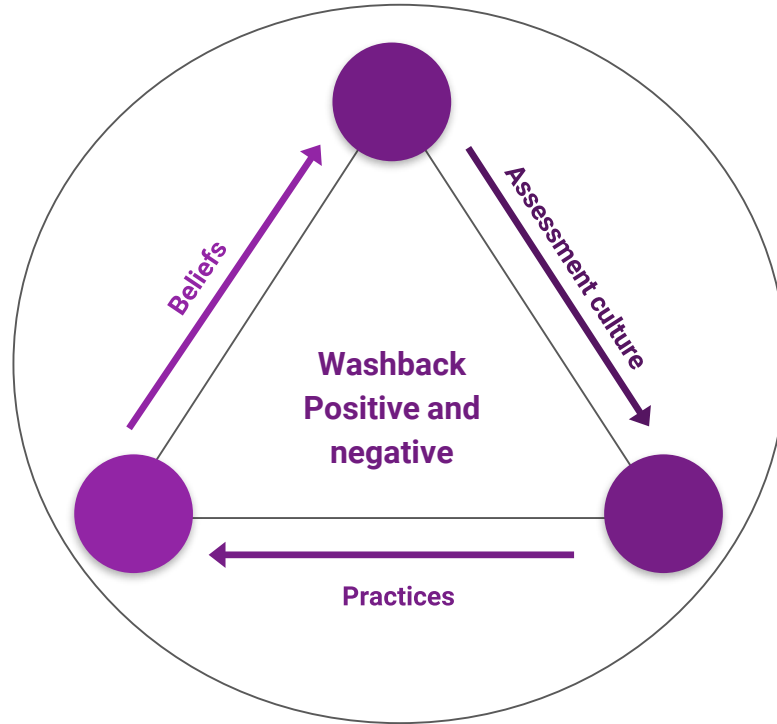
The study results are congruent with previous findings (e.g., Horak, 2011; Gebrill & Eid 2017)

Washback in this context was found to be:

Positive	Negative
<p>Test preparation practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● familiarize students with the item format● lead to score gains● lower test taker anxiety	<p>Test preparation practices</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● narrow down the curriculum (Gebrill & Eid, 2017)● increase teaching to the test● increase private tutoring → fairness issues● increase test wiseness● decrease creativity● affect learning

Conclusions

- Test preparation:
- appropriate/ ethical for the majority
- controversial
- Teachers had rather high self efficacy in this regard.
- Teacher trainers demonstrated more awareness of the controversial nature of such practices.



An assessment culture that is testing oriented

- pressure from parents, school and learners

- implementation of a wide range of test preparation activities
- personal and social concerns with learning outcomes and test scores

Recommendations

- Align this national exam of English to the curriculum;
- Promote learning oriented pedagogical practices through formative assessment;
- Standardized test preparation through guidelines and teacher training;
- Develop Assessment Literacy;
- Opt for more performance based assessment to minimize the development and use of test wiseness.

Limitations

- This washback study could have included data from learners, parents and even policy makers to gain more insight into washback as a complex phenomenon.
- The study was mainly exploratory and did not address possible relationships between beliefs, practices and contextual factors.
- It relied mainly on indirect data elicitation methods rather than a direct observation of these test preparation practices.

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THANK YOU