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## The National Standardized Test Policy for English Subject: Students' Perception

Amirul Mukminin\*  
Jambi University

Putri Ayu Lestari\*\*  
Jambi University

Yuliana Afifah\*\*\*  
Jambi University

Fathiah Rahmadani\*\*\*\*  
Jambi University

Robi Hendra\*\*\*\*\*  
Jambi University

### Abstract

The present study was part of a larger study concerned with examining whether students perceived the use of the national standardized test policy was taking the teaching and learning English at schools in the right direction. A total of 267 completed questionnaires received from year 1, 2, and 3 students enrolled at a public university English education program, Indonesia and answered a questionnaire addressing test preparation activities, controversial testing practices, and the use and accuracy of the national standardized test. This study shed light on our understanding of how participants perceived the national standardized test policy had changed the process of teaching and learning English in the classroom.

**Keywords:** *The Indonesian national standardized test policy, English testing*

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\* Amirul Mukminin, PhD, Jambi University, Indonesia.

E-mail: amirmuk06@gmail.com

\*\* Putri Ayu Lestari

\*\*\* Yuliana Afifah

\*\*\*\* Fathiah Rahmadani

\*\*\*\*\* Robi Hendra

## Introduction

Standardized testing has been part of the educational process in Indonesia and plays a key role in the education system. Teachers, principals, parents, and policymakers consider the standardized test can be keys to improving the productivity of Indonesian schools. For policy makers, the results of the standardized test can be employed to evaluate educational organizations, policies, and programs to determine which are most effective and efficient (Phelps, 2010; Dolezalek, 2009; Jones, 2007; Jones & Egley, 2004; Linn, 2000). For teachers and schools, the tests results can be used to measure the teachers' and students' strengths and weaknesses as a basis for planning educational programs and can inform the degree to which teaching and learning process are working in the classroom and thus inform policymakers about choices they want to take (Mukminin *et al.*, 2013; Phelps, 2010; Dolezalek, 2009).

However, some educators and researchers critique the use of the standardized testing in assessing student learning and development due to its biases, inaccuracies, limited ability to measure achievement or ability, and other flaws (Grant & Sleeter, 2007; Nieto & Bode, 2008). Nieto and Bode (2008) uttered, "Another practice that impedes equity in schools is the uncritical use of standardized testing, particularly when employed to sort students rather than to improve instruction" (p. 122). Additionally previous studies have indicated that high-stakes testing policies did not consistently improve the general learning and competencies of students (Amrein & Berliner, 2002) while Firestone, Mayrowetz, and Fairman (1998) explained that it evidenced that high-stakes testing had forced teachers into make parallel their curriculum to the areas tested. Jones, Jones, and Hargrove (2003) explained that standardized tests were generally limited to only a few subjects and the curriculum was limited to the subjects tested. Other subjects might be excluded completely from the curriculum or from teaching and learning process. Additionally Stecher (2002) revealed that several potential effects of standardized tests were possible, both positive and negative for school, teachers, and students starting from curriculum, morale, and motivation. Jones and Egley (2004) found that teachers reported that standard approaches had restrained their teaching capacity such as restraining their ability from meeting the learning needs of students. Hoffman, Assaf, and Paris (2001) found that teachers spent between 8 and 10 hours a week on test preparation to help their students during the entire year, which reduced time for instruction. In addition, Shepard and Dougherty (1991) who investigated the effects the high-stakes testing on instruction by surveying 360 teachers in grades 3, 5 and 6. They found that participants received pressure from district administration and media to improve test scores as a result participants just focused on giving basic skill instruction and giving more time on test preparation. In Indonesia, Mukminin *et al.* (2013) who studied the voices of English teachers found that the national standardized exam had brought undesirable concerns on education.

Despite its inaccuracies, biases, and impropriety as found in the previous studies, the Indonesian central government still uses the national standardized exam policy throughout the country. The test consists of some specific subjects. For science students, the tested subjects are Biology, Physics, Chemistry, Mathematics, English, and Indonesian (Mukminin *et al.*, 2013). For social students, they are economics, history, Geography, Mathematics, English, and Indonesian. These subjects indicate that the national standardized exam only tests students' cognitive skills (mental skill) but the test ignores the other domains of educational activities, namely, affective and psychomotor domains. Bloom (1956) argues that educational activities consist of three key domains, that is cognitive, affective (growth in feelings or emotional areas) and psychomotor (manual or physical skills). It means that merely scores of limited subjects cannot be used to judge students' success in school. Specifically, it suggests that as one of the tested subjects in the national standardized exam, the success of learning English cannot be judged by the standardized-test scores as it often measures superficial thinking (Kohn, 2000).

However, regardless of its controversies, research on the practices of the national standardized exam, especially for English subject in Indonesia is still limited except for Mukminin *et al.* (2013). Lack of literature and research on the national standardized exam policy practices may not give much information whether the policy directs our teaching and learning English in the right or wrong direction. This study dealt with students' perceptions on the use of the national standardized exam for assessing their learning achievement for the English subject. The purpose of this study was to examine whether students perceived the use of the national standardized exam policy was taking the teaching and learning English at schools in the right direction. To achieve the purpose of the study, the following questions guided this study were (1) what do the students perceive on the use of the national standardized exam for assessing their learning achievement for the English subject? and (2) what do they perceive on whether the tests are taking the teaching and learning English in the right or wrong direction related to curriculum and teaching and learning process?

## Methods

This paper was part of a larger study to examine whether students perceived the use of the national standardized exam policy was taking the teaching and learning English at schools in the right direction. This article reported the quantitative findings. The site for this study was at one public university English education program, Jambi, Indonesia. We decided to take the first, second, and third year students to participate in our study. The reasons we did this. First, it was not easy to have access to the final year of senior high school students as we might disturb their teaching and learning process and they had not finished their study yet. Second, the first, second, and third year students in our research site had taken and experienced the English test in the national standardized test. So, they would be the appropriate sample for our study to share their experience before and after taking the test. A sample of year 1, 2, and 3 students who were enrolled at English education program at one public university in Jambi, Sumatra, Indonesia was investigated.

A demographic information form and questionnaire were used to collect the data. First, we distributed an invitation letter to year 1, 2, and 3 English education program students if they agreed; we gave them an informed consent form stating their willingness to take part in this study. Second, after having their informed consent form, we distributed a questionnaire which was designed with two sections. Section 1 requested demographic information (year, age, and gender) of the student while section 2 consisted of three major sections, including (1) 4 items related to test preparation activities, (2) 3 items used for measuring controversial testing practices, and (3) 3 items related to the use and accuracy of the national standardized test that we developed from the literature review. In this study, we constructed the questionnaires in the form of closed-ended statements by providing preset response options for the participants. We utilized *Liker scale* consisting of a series of statements, all of which were related to a particular target which ranged from *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Not Sure*, *Disagree*, and *Strongly Disagree*. However, in this article, we added the option of *No Answer* as during our analysis, we found some participants did not provide their answer. The survey questionnaires were personally administered with the help of co-researchers. None of participants received any kind of compensation for their participation in this study. The questionnaire was distributed from June 2015 to January 2016 to the first, second, and third year students. A total of 267 completed questionnaires were received. The sample consisted of 55 males and 212 females and the ages of students ranged from 16-21 years old.

We conducted a pilot study to check the appropriateness of the questionnaire. Additionally, we used what Johnson and Christensen (2008) called “a think – aloud technique.” Johnson and Christensen (2008) argued that this technique allowed and asked participants to verbalize their thought and perception about the questionnaire while the researchers wrote down every single thing about participant’s opinion. This technique would help the researcher to determine if the participants get the same interpretation about the items in the questionnaire with the researcher. For this study, through this technique, we invited some non-real participants to verbalize their thought and perception about the ten items and we wrote down every single thing about participant’s opinion. For example, one female participant suggested not use the word of “exam” in the questionnaire. Instead, we had better use the word of “test.” Another female participant also suggested us to use “English teacher” in the statements. The combination of these two ways was expected to make the questionnaire read for use in this study. Also, we used the techniques for the reason that the ten items had been developed from previous studies (e.g., Mukminin *et al.*, 2013; Jones, 2007; Jones & Egley, 2004; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991). This research was a survey research method and Cronbach’s alpha was calculated to determine its reliability. The reliability analysis for the test preparation activities construct showed an Alpha ( $\alpha$ ) of 0.845. The controversial testing practices construct presented an alpha ( $\alpha$ ) of 0.715. The reliability analysis for the use and accuracy of the national standardized test construct showed an alpha ( $\alpha$ ) of 0.625. Hence, the reliability of the questionnaire was acceptable. Additionally, to analyze the 267 completed questionnaires, each student response was carefully analyzed. The frequency of each statement was computed and expressed as percentage of its total score.

## Findings and Discussion

This study shed light on our understanding of the perception on whether students perceived the use of the national standardized exam policy was taking the teaching and learning English at schools in the right direction. The findings in this study are presented into three parts. First part describes the summary of the students’ responses on the questionnaires related to test preparation activities. Second, it presents the summary of the students’ responses controversial testing practices. Last, it depicts the use and accuracy of the national standardized test.

### Test preparation activities

Data in Table 1 indicate that the students' responses to the statement of whether during the last year of the school their English teacher prepared them for yearly standardized testing by providing class work and English tests in the same formats as the national standardized test, the percentage of the participants who answered "Strongly Agree" (54 participants, 20, 23 %) and "Agree" (159 participants, 59.55%) was 79, 78% out of 267 participants. It was considerably higher than the percentage of the participants who answered "Not Sure" (30 participants, 11.24%), "Disagree" (20 participants, 7.49%), and "Strongly Disagree" (3 participants, 1, 12%). It is also interesting to note that one participant (0.37%) had "No Answer." Our findings also indicated that regarding with the statement of whether their English teacher trained them by giving the old national standardized English tests in the classroom, the percentage of the students who answered "Strongly Agree" (122 participants, 45.69%) and "Agree" (130 participants, 48.70%) was 94.39 % out of 267 participants. It was significantly greater than that of the participants who answered "Not Sure" (6 participants, 2.25%), "Disagree" (8 participants, 2.10%), "Strongly Disagree" (0 %), and "No Answer" (1 participant, 0, 37%). For the statement of whether their English teacher gave them test-taking strategies to face the national standardized test, 107 participants (40.07%) chose "Strongly Agree" and 135 participants (50.56%) reported "Agree" while of 267 participants, 12 participants (4.50%) reported "Not Sure," 9 participants (3.37%) chose "Disagree," 2 participants (0.75%) chose "Strongly Disagree," and 2 participants (0.75%) reported "No Answer."

**Table 1.** Summary of responses on test preparation activities (n=267)

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Answer
My English teacher prepares me for yearly standardized testing by providing class work and English tests in the same formats as the national standardized test.	(54) 20.23%	(159) 59.55%	(30) 11.24%	(20) 7.49%	(3) 1,12%	(1) 0.37%
My English teacher trains me by giving the old national standardized English tests in the classroom to give the class practice before I take the national standardized test.	122 45.69%	130 48.70%	6 2,25%	8 2.10%	0	1 0.37%
My English teacher gives me test-taking strategies to face the national standardized test than to succeed  in the English lessons	107 40.07%	135 50.56%	12 4.50%	9 3.37%	2 0.75%	2 0.75%
The national standardized test demotivates me to learn English because my English teacher focuses on drilling me to the test.	28 10.49%	136 50.95%	74 27.71%	22 8.23%	5 1.87%	2 0.75%

The analysis of the data related to whether the national standardized test demotivated students to learn English because their English teacher focused on drilling them to the test, 28 participants (10.49%) reported "Strongly Agree" and 136 participants (50.95%) stated "Agree" while the percentage of the participants who reported "Not Sure" (74 Participants, 27.71%), "Disagree" (22 participants, 8.23%), "Strongly Disagree" (5 participants, 1.87%), and "No Answer" (2 participants, 0.75%). The findings of this study suggested that standardized testing made English teachers compelled to spend lots

of time on drill and practice their students on preparing their students for the tests. Our findings are in line with previous literature (e.g. Mukminin *et al.*, 2013; Marchant, Paulson, & Shunk, 2006; Jones & Egley, 2004; Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003; Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Stecher, 2002; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001) indicating that instead of focusing on teaching and learning process, teacher were coerced to teach to the tests so that their students were successful in getting higher scores.

### Controversial testing practices

According to the summary of responses presented in Table 2, the students' responses to the statement of whether before the test, their English teacher provided them with the answer keys to the test questions through electronic media, it is evident that of 267 participants, 13.48% (36) of participants reported "Strongly Agree" and 11.24% (30) of participants stated "Agree" whereas 22.48% (60) of participants indicated "Not Sure," 23.97% (64) of participants reported "Disagree," and 28.83% (77) of participants indicated "Strongly Disagree." Next, for the statement of whether before the test, their classmates gave them the answer keys to the test questions, 4.87% (13) of participants reported "Strongly Agree" and 36.33% (97) of them indicated "Agree." In the meantime, 23.60% (63) of participants testified "Not Sure," 22.10% (59) chose "Disagree," 12.73% (34) of them indicated "Strongly Disagree," and 0.37% (1) of participant had "No Answer."

**Table 2.** Summary of responses on controversial testing practices (n=267)

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	No Answer
Before the test, my English teacher gives me the answer keys to the test questions through electronic media	36 13.48%	30 11.24%	60 22.48%	64 23.97%	77 28.83%	0
Before the test, my classmates give me the answer keys to the test questions	13 4.87%	97 36.33%	63 23.60%	59 22.10%	34 12.73%	1 0.37%
Before the test, the key answer keys to the test questions are given by the school	14 5.24%	44 16.49%	62 23.22%	79 29.59%	65 24.34%	3 1.12%

In terms of whether before the test, their school provided them with the answers keys to the test questions, the result of the analysis indicated that 14 participants (5.24%) reported "Strongly Agree," followed by 44 respondents (16.49%) testified "Agree", 62 participants (23.22%) selected "Not Sure", 79 participants (29.59%) indicated "Disagree", 65 participants (24.34%) preferred "Strongly disagree," and 3 participants (1.12%) had "No Answer." These findings are consistent with the findings of previous studies (e.g., Mukminin *et al.*, 2013; Shepard & Dougherty, 1991) revealing that cheating was one of the unintended consequences of the high-stakes testing.

### The use and accuracy of the national standardized test

Data in Table 3 indicate that the students' responses to the statement of whether the national standardized test for English subject is accurate to measure students' real English proficiency or not.

**Table 3.** Summary of responses on the use and accuracy of the national standardized test (n=267)

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Not Sure	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The results of the national standardized test does not reflect the real students' English proficiency	90 33.70%	105 39.33%	56 20.97%	15 5.62%	1 0.37%
The national standardized test is unfair because all students are tested with the same test regardless of students' backgrounds	93 34.84%	86 32.20%	42 15.74%	35 13.10%	11 4.11%
Students' learning progress in English cannot be assessed by one-time standardized test	142 53.18%	98 36.70%	20 7.50%	4 1.50%	3 1.12%

From the summary of responses presented in Table 3, of 267 participants, 33.70% of them reported "Strongly Agree" and 39.33% of them reported "Agree" that the results of the national standardized test did not reflect their real English proficiency. It was considerably higher than the percentage of the participants who answered "Not Sure" (56 participants, 20.97%), "Disagree" (15 participants, 5.62%), and "Strongly Disagree" (1 participants, 0.37%). Additionally, when they were asked whether the national standardized test was unfair because all students were tested with the same test regardless of students' backgrounds, 34.84% of participants answered "Strongly Agree" and 32.20% of them reported "Agree" while 15.74% of participants answered "Not Sure," 13.10% of them reported "Disagree," 4.11% of them "Strongly Disagreed." For the students' responses to the statement of "students' learning progress in English cannot be assessed by one-time standardized test", the percentage of the participants who answered "Strongly Agree" (142 participants, 53.18%) and "Agree" (98 participants, 36.70%) was 89, 88% out of 267 participants. It was significantly greater than that of the participants who answered "Not Sure" (20 participants, 7.50%), "Disagree" (4 participants, 1.50%), and "Strongly Disagree" (3 participants, 1, 12%). Our findings support the results of the previous research (Mukminin *et al.*, 2013) who found that the test could not be used to describe students' English ability. Also, few previous studies (e.g., Jones & Egley, 2004; Jones, Jones, & Hargrove, 2003; Amrein & Berliner, 2002; Stecher, 2002; Hoffman, Assaf, & Paris, 2001) revealed that the standardized testing could not be a picture of students' real ability as many unintended factors contributing to their scores.

### Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

This paper was part of a larger study which was to examine whether students perceived the use of the national standardized exam policy was taking the teaching and learning English at schools in the right direction. Although conclusions are controlled by the small sample size, the findings of this study shed light on our understanding of how participants perceived the use of the national standardized exam policy in teaching and learning English in the classroom. Overall, the findings of this study exposed that first teachers and school focused on teaching to the test. During the last of the school year, teacher and school prepared their students for yearly standardized testing by providing class work and English tests in the same formats as the national standardized test. Second, cheating happened during the test administration. Teachers and schools might be forced to provide the answer keys for their students to help their students succeed in the test. Third, the use and accuracy of the national standardized test to assess students' learning progress in English were not a right direction as it is only one-time standardized test.

Implication for policies, the findings from this study indicated that the national standardized test has brought about unintended consequences to curriculum, students, teachers, and school. The

national standardized test forced teachers to teach students to be able to pass the test rather than to teach them to learn English at school. Some recommendations are offered as follows:

- Not to use test scores as the only measure to decide students who can continue to the next level of education and who cannot;
- Use the national standardized test as only the test to monitor the quality of education in every province throughout Indonesia after each of them has its own standardized test and the national standardized test should not be given every year;
- Provide local governments (provinces and districts), school, and teachers choices to choose other kinds of standardized tests provided by other parties such as universities and test centers;
- Involve schools and teachers in assessing and evaluate their student learning and progress because they know exactly what happens to their students, especially for affective and psychomotor domains by using portfolios.

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