



Article

The Backwash Effect of the National Exam on Upper Secondary Moroccan Teaching

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A B S T R A C T

This study aims to investigate the issue of assessment in the Moroccan educational system. Precisely, it aims at exploring the washback of the Secondary national English examination on English teaching and learning practices in the context of upper secondary education in Morocco. To attain the objective of the study, questionnaires are distributed to 70 teachers, and a focus group protocol with 20 students was conducted in three high schools. The findings reveal that the examination has a strong negative influence on the students and the teachers. The main harmful washback effect of this exam is found to be the neglect of teaching the skills of listening and speaking as they are not assessed. Moreover, the results of the study show that the contents of teaching are highly influenced by the exam. Even though the syllabus was changed from grammar-based to communicative-based, English Examinations are still grammar-ruled and reading-based. Similarly, students are also affected by the washback effect of the national exam because it brings anxiety that can distort their progress and performance, and students might not be able to learn real-life knowledge but instead learn discrete points of knowledge that are assessed. On the basis of these results, a new English exam is suggested, hoping to prompt positive washback and refine the English-speaking performance of Moroccan highschoolers.

I. INTRODUCTION

Several studies carried out in applied linguistics over different periods of time have pinned down that exams have an influence on the processes of teaching and learning, teachers' professional background, and preferences of learners and other stakeholders (Shohamy, 1993; Shohamy et al., 1996; Messick, 1996, McNamara, 2000). In addition, Examinations push students and teachers to do something undesirable such as focusing on test-taking techniques, focusing on grammar, reading comprehension, writing, and neglecting the aural/oral aspects of English. From this statement, one can easily understand that the national exam may negatively influence the perception of teachers and learners about the purpose of teaching and learning.

Many researchers and practitioners in the field

of language education and testing have emphasized the impact of tests, especially public examinations and high-stakes tests (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Thompson, Allen, 2012; Au & Gourd, 2013; Razavipour & Shoostari, 2020; Xiaohua Liu, 2021;). This means that these tests are designed to impact teaching and learning. Naturally, when students are faced with exams, they feel anxious and nervous about their performance in that examination, which will determine whether they will pass or fail. In the body of literature on language testing and assessment, the way tests impact the educational system is widespread. This influence, a phenomenon known in language education as washback (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Messick, 1996; Hamp-Lyons, 1997) is bidirectional—positive or negative—depending largely on several mediating factors, one of which is teachers' teaching practices, as reported in the

forthcoming sections.

After reviewing a sum of literature related to the fields of language testing in Morocco, studies about the impact of high-stake examinations in particular are extremely scarce. There was a study of learning assessment exercises in Moroccan life and textbooks. It was conducted by Lalla Khaddouj Yousfi, Fatiha Kaddari, Elachqar and Faouzi Errachidi (2013). They argued that pupils need to be active participants in the assessment process rather than victims of examinations. This can only be achieved if they develop the skills of self-assessment, understand their learning goal and assess what they need to do to reach it.

The object of this study will be the Moroccan Baccalaureate examination. It is a public examination administered at the last phase of education in Morocco after students finished three years of highschool. The exam is wholly designed by the High Committee for Examinations, which is directly under the authority of examinations department in the Ministry of National Education, Preschool and Sports, Morocco. Generally, students take the test in June after completing the compulsory tasks in all examination subjects including English. Considering its weight in the Moroccan society, the washback effect of this examination is to be expected. An overview of National Tests in Europe (2014) indicated that in Morocco, as in almost all Arab countries, the educational system is mostly test-driven and examinations, especially the public ones, are of huge importance. Consequently, the examination is perceived to have a very big influence on society and educational institutions, and this is echoed in the endeavor and money spent by parents on extra hours in order to help their children perform well in the examination.

As mentioned previously in the discussion of English assessment in Morocco, examinations are considered as positive tools that can be employed to control the educational system. However, policymakers are not aware of the consequences that exist along with the overuse of these examinations. Lately, scholars have given attention to examining washback, which has become a widespread educational issue. However, in Morocco, scant attention has been given to examining the washback of the baccalaureate exam on teachers' and students' practices.

Until the beginning of the 1990s washback was believed to relate to the quality of the design

of examinations, for instance: '*If it is a good examination, we will have a useful effect on teaching; if bad, then it will have a damaging effect on teaching*' (Heaton 1990: 16). Bachman and Palmer (1996, p.27) define washback to be an aspect of impact on processes of learning and instruction. It is a type of effect, which relates to the effects of examinations on classroom practices, particularly teaching and learning. The term washback (sometimes known as backwash) has been given various definitions by many scholars extending from its influence on teachers' and students' practices to the very intricate impact of tests on the educational system and society altogether (Green, 2013; Fan & Song, 2014; Allen, 2016, Hung & Huang, 2019; Razavipour & Shoostari, 2020).

Buck (1988) associates the definition of washback with the limited purview of the effect of tests on the classroom practices of teachers and students. Another term that is mentioned in the literature is *test impact*. Wall (1997) differentiated between *test impact* and *test washback*. According to him, *test impact* refers to the impact of tests exerted on policymakers or individuals, and test washback indicates the effects of tests on teaching and learning practices.

The current research aims at investigating the issue of assessment in the Moroccan educational system. Especially, the washback of the Secondary national English examination on English teaching and learning practices in the context of upper secondary education in Morocco.

II. METHODS

Designing a solid research plan was not a simply a matter of opting for eclectic research approaches. Gay and Airasian (1996) stated that the nature of the question or problem to be investigated determines whether the study is qualitative or quantitative. Washback researchers suggest qualitative inquiry to analyze the washback effect of a given test (Cheng, 2005). Surely, it is also important to refer to quantitative data where and when necessary. In view of the complexity of washback, both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed in this study. The former includes the use of student focus group and classroom observation. This approach is preferable because it is used to study the selected issue in its natural setting, attempting to make sense of or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning people

bring to them (Denzin and Lincoln, 2005), whereas the latter was implemented using questionnaires.

A total of 70 high school teachers participated in this study (35 males and 35 females). In addition, classroom observation was conducted to see the overall picture of the teaching-learning process (especially teachers' language teaching practices under the influence of the Baccalaureate exam). Finally, a focus group discussion with students was carried out and analyzed to be triangulated with teachers' responses in the questionnaire and classroom observation.

Table1 The Sample's Background Information

Variables	Categories	Frequencies
Gender	Male	35
	Female	35
Age	Less than 25	4
	25-30	6
	30-35	36
	30-45	12
	More than 45	12
Educational Level	Bachelor's Degree	43
	Master's Degree	18
	Doctorate Degree	9
Working Experience	Less than 5 years	8
	5-10 years	15
	10-20 years	35
	More than 20 years	12
Teaching Levels	Common Core	13
	First baccalaureate	21
	Second baccalaureate	36

Table 1 shows that the diagram shows that the age category that returned the completed questionnaire is aged between 30 and 35 years old. The number of female participants is equal to the number of male participants. Yet, in the research about washback, gender has not been categorized as a crucial constituent that can mediate the washback effect. However, others think that the differences that are related to age, the educational degree held, and their working experience could play a role in fostering various kinds of washback in this study.

Classroom observations concentrated on high-school teachers particularly those who teach second-year baccalaureate. The questionnaire targeted the same category of teachers in addition to other teachers from different high schools. Focus group discussion was employed, 20 students attended the discussion and tried to give responses to all the questions the researcher forwarded. Even though a few students were reluctant to give responses, most of the attended learners actively participated in the discussion using English and Arabic. For ethical purposes, informed consent was obtained from all participants before proceeding with any investigation, and confidentiality was ensured.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Given the objectives of the study and the nature of the collected data, general descriptive statistics were employed to quantitatively analyze the responses. The focus was specifically on frequencies and percentages designed based on the examined numerical data. The goal was to eventually interpret the findings following precise quantitative descriptions. This section presents the results of the questionnaire items which will be accompanied by relevant statements from what the students said during the focus group discussion.

Perceptions of teaching

The aim behind this section is to know more about teachers' viewpoints on teaching and whether they are influenced by the existence of the examination. Teachers were inquired first to select from three choices representing their principal consternation when teaching second-year baccalaureate students: students' knowledge of the English language, students' use of the English language, or students' examination preparation. This was followed by two questions in which teachers were asked to differentiate between, on the one hand, tasks they believe enhance language learning, and, on the other hand, activities they think are important to prepare for the English Baccalaureate Exam.

Figure 1 shows that students' examination preparation received the highest rating from 52% of the participants followed by students' use of English as chosen by 36%, whereas students' knowledge about the language received the lowest rating. The implication that can be drawn from this is that most teachers are influenced by the presence of the Baccalaureate exam.

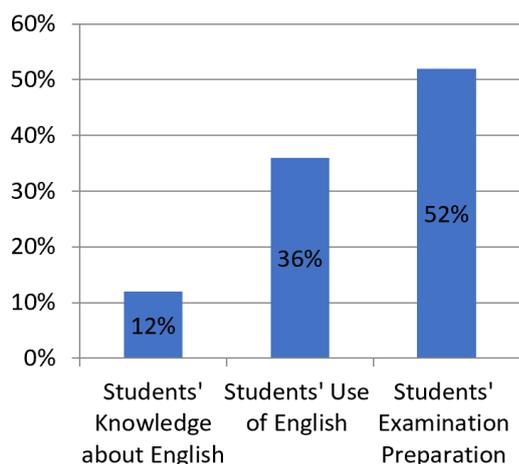


Figure 1 Teachers' Main Concern When Teaching Second Baccalaureate Classes

However, the advent of CLT has revolutionized all aspects of language teaching, giving special importance to functional language wherein the social cultures' codes of language use are embedded. The main objectives of ELT in Morocco which are formulated in the Official Guidelines are thereby articulated to the new conception of communicative competence, adopted by CLT and advocated in the standards-based approach.

Among the outcomes that these guidelines maintain is the application of a communicatively-oriented teaching methodology in which learners will be able to communicate in both oral and written forms, interpret both oral and written messages, show cultural understanding and present oral and written information to various audiences for a variety of purposes (The Moroccan Official Guidelines, 2007: 5). For this reason,

teachers are aware of the importance of developing students' communicative competence and their ability to use the language. This fact is confirmed by one of the students, in order to elicit more data, who was asked the following question:

“In your opinion, what is the main concern of your English language teacher while teaching? Does he/she focus on preparing you for the national exam or do they teach you English to develop your communicative ability?”

P3 answered “*our teacher takes into account the baccalaureate exam in order to prepare us and help us to get a good mark.... Uh! Concerning communication, sometimes she teaches us how to use English in our daily life, like asking for directions, how to talk on the phone, how to borrow or lend something, asking for help...*”

For the next two sub-questions, teachers were asked to employ a five-item Likert scale which is a psychometric scale that is used to obtain participants' degree of agreement with a statement. The researcher opted for this scale because it is easily understood, and the responses are easily quantifiable. The first question ranges from ‘definitely yes’ to ‘not at all’ and the second one from ‘Strongly agree’ to ‘Strongly disagree’ so as to distinguish between the sorts of activities they think are important to promote language learning, and the types of activities they think are important to prepare the students for the Baccalaureate exam.

A close analysis of the Figure 2 reveals that the biggest share of the participants (50%) think that textbook activities are unquestionably

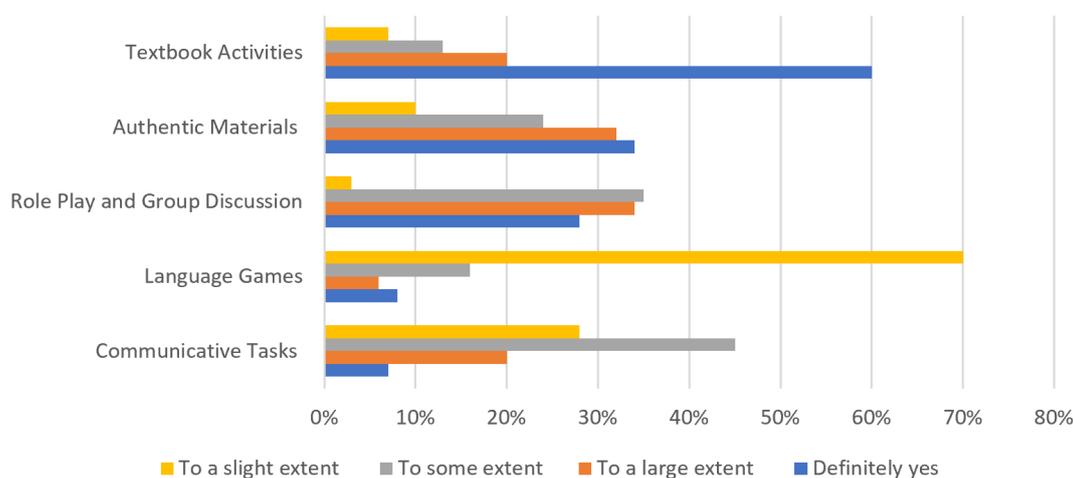


Figure 2 Materials Used to Prepare for The Baccalaureate Exam

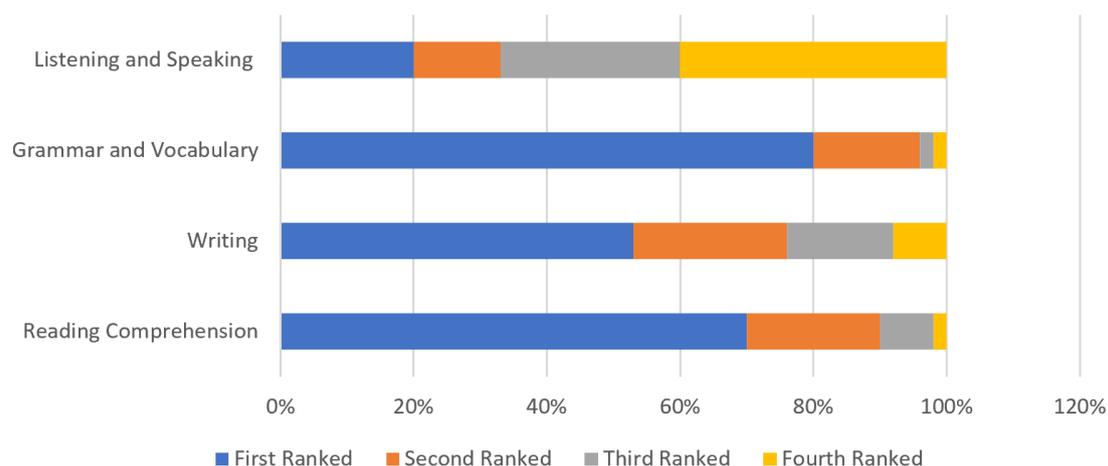


Figure 3 The Most Important Skills in Second Baccalaureate Classes

effective to prepare for the Baccalaureate exam and to promote language learning. Unexpectedly, it must be noted that 7% of the respondents think that communicative tasks are surely effective for the sake of preparing students for the Baccalaureate exam, while another 29% agree with the fact that using multimedia for listening skills and using communicative materials are fundamental to some extent in promoting learning.

Language games along with role play and group discussion are expected to be a valuable resource for second language learning, offering a large amount of language input in the form of authentic English dialogue. However, 32% claimed that they never use language games for examination preparation and 34% believe that role plays and group discussion may be effective and useful for the examination. As for as authentic material is concerned, the participants believe that it can yield more assistance for examination preparation (34% definitely yes, 32% to a large extent). According to learners' responses, the reference materials (books) their teachers usually advise them to read in the library were: Basic English Grammar, Understanding and using English grammar, and English Grammar in Use. They added that most of the time, their teachers teach them from these reference materials and extra worksheets as the activities and notes given in the textbook were not interesting. Most of the Classroom test items were also prepared from these materials and different years' national examination papers. All these reference books are completely grammar-based and national exam-related materials.

Teaching Content, Materials and Methodology

This section begins with a two-point question in which teachers were required to choose the skills that are given much importance in second-year baccalaureate classes. As illustrated, grammar and vocabulary were ranked first, succeeded by writing then reading comprehension. Improving grammar and vocabulary skills appears to be more important for teachers than reading and comprehension skills because the former is more challenging to improve and needs more time and practice. Be that as it may, these findings show a clear tendency from teachers towards prioritizing the skills that are more emphasized in the examination since, as was expected; speaking and listening were ranked as the least important skills.

In addition, to realize whether grammar skill was given more emphasis in the classroom, the learners were interviewed. According to their responses, English language teachers spend most of their time teaching grammar and vocabulary and doing different year's national exam papers. Examples and class homework as well as classroom quizzes were prepared for national exams. For instance, one interviewee responded

“Our teacher gives more emphasis to grammar because when we look at the national exam, most of the questions are from the grammar part. That is why our teacher usually focuses on grammar. So, after we learn the grammar, our teacher gives us questions about the lesson we learned from different years' national exam papers.”

According to this response, the national exam

is influencing English language teachers to give more focus to grammar than learners' needs. Since a wide part of the national exams was grammar, learners always need to learn grammar rules in order to help them succeed in the exam. As a result, they usually try to force their teacher to skip some other aspects of language skills like listening and speaking and focus more on grammar and vocabulary only.

The results of the questionnaire showed that the reading skill was given more emphasis in previous exams. That means it was the second language skill given more emphasis in the previous national examinations. To identify whether the reading skill was given more emphasis, less emphasis, or totally neglected during the teaching/learning practices in the classroom, learners were interviewed. The responses obtained from the focus group interview support the responses given by teachers. For instance, among the interviewed learners, one student responded

"Our teacher usually teaches us grammar and reading skill. Because most of the time in different years' national exams, a lot of questions were prepared from reading and grammar. So, she teaches us how to answer questions from the passage. But he gives more emphasis to grammar than reading skills."

Concerning the skill of writing, the responses given by students realized that less emphasis was given to the writing skill in the classroom because there were only a few writing skill questions in all previous national exams. For instance, one respondent replied:

"Most of the time we do not study writing in the classroom because our teacher skips it by telling us that it will not help us in the Baccalaureate exam. He teaches us only important points that will help us to answer national exam questions...for example, how to write letters, reports, book reviews..."

Generally, the point concluded from teachers' and students' responses is that the writing skill is given less emphasis in the classroom during the teaching-learning process. Only a few writing lessons which may appear in the national exam are taught in the classroom which shows the harmful washback of the national exam on the contents of teaching. The information obtained from the focus

group interview also realized that less emphasis was given to speaking. For instance, among students, one respondent reported

"Yes, but it is only sometimes. Our teacher usually skips speaking and listening to save time ... We also want to learn grammar instead of wasting our time on group discussions. We need our teacher to finish the textbook soon and help us by doing different years' national exam questions."

This response revealed that it was also learners' interest to give less emphasis to speaking and focus more on grammar, functions, and vocabulary instead. According to this response, students and teachers do not want to waste their time practicing speaking through pair communication or group discussions. What both of them want is to finish the textbook very soon and do different years' national exam questions.

As listening is one of the basic language skills, there are a lot of activities or lessons that can help learners to improve their listening skill. So, teachers are expected to teach and improve their students' listening skill. This is why, students were interviewed. The responses obtained from them also realized that the teaching and learning of listening were neglected in the classroom. According to their responses, their teachers do not teach them listening in the classroom because they have no time. For instance, one respondent replied

"No, they do not teach it. I don't know but maybe because we don't have enough time. There are a lot of very important lessons that can help us in the exam. Most of the time, our teachers focus more on reading and grammar."

The analysis of the responses given by learners and teachers was almost the same. What can be concluded from the above information was that the teaching of listening in the classroom was totally neglected. According to their responses, the reason why the teaching of this skill was neglected is that teachers have no time to teach other important language skills like grammar and reading. This is an undesirable perception of not looking at all language skills equally which is resulted from the harmful washback of the national exam. Regarding this, Shohamy et al., (1996) reported that more instructional time is allotted to exam preparation classes, especially in the case of high-stakes tests.

In order to find out the influence of the baccalaureate examination on teachers' choice of materials, content, and methods, teachers were asked whether they make use of exam-related material in second-year baccalaureate classes.

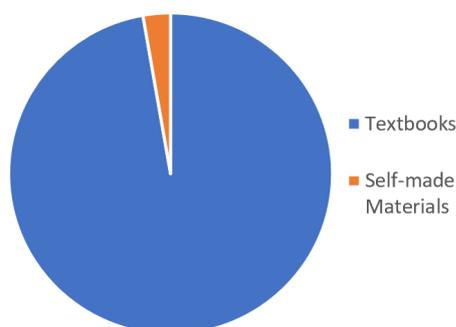


Figure 4 The Use of Exam-related Materials to Prepare Students for the Baccalaureate Exam

The results of the Figure 4 shows that an overwhelming majority (92%) confirmed the use of exam-related materials in examination classes. Subsequently, when they were asked about what type of exam-related material they were particularly using, the respondents reported the following (see figure 5).

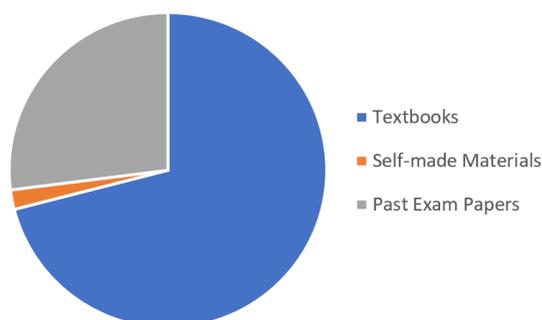


Figure 5 Types of Materials Used in English Lessons

Figure 5 shows that teachers relied more heavily on textbooks and past exam papers. It seems that teachers favor using their own materials to help students grasp the rules and practice the language.

With reference to the results of classroom observations, the washback effect was observed with three teachers who explained that they always bring past exam papers when the textbook was covered. In order to know more about the learning strategies that teachers recommend the most to their students in order to prepare for the examinations, teachers' answers were divergent:

Considering the content and format of the examination, it was expected that using only exam-related materials would receive the highest ratings

from teachers as the most recommended learning strategy, followed by memorizing grammar rules and vocabulary. However, it is evident that aspects such as communication, classroom participation, and expressing opinions are also conceived to be valuable regardless of the nature of the examination. In addition, in terms of materials, teachers believe that it is better for students to expose themselves to various English media rather than using exam-related materials only. One learner consents to these facts when he said

“Our teacher always advises us to memorize grammar rules and vocabulary especially the ones that are repeated in past exams.”

Analysis of the Current English Examination

The Baccalaureate exam, in which the English language is one item, is presumed to have an influence, especially on the pedagogical practices of teachers and students as it has a pivotal role in the lives of the learners. It is a high-stakes test. The grades which the students obtain in this examination have an enduring impact on their school lives as their chances of admission to the university are determined based on their grades. Also, the placement of the students at colleges and departments in the universities which the students perceive ‘more prestigious’ or ‘less prestigious’ is established on the basis of their grades. Consequently, various stakeholders such as students, teachers, school administrators, parents, and other participants put considerable emphasis on this examination. Moroccan teachers confront tensions generated by the demands of learners' requirements, syllabus specifications, and their own methods of teaching.

Because of time constraints, teachers are unable to do more than follow the textbook. Grammar and writing are the most important aspects of the exam. So, oral communication is often neglected. The classroom environment is in English. Teachers are not allowed to use their mother tongue. Some students can recite a complicated sentence on the impact of women in society but when prompted on a simpler subject, they may struggle, and the situation becomes more horrifying. Communication is very necessary in the job sector. Students who studied English for so many years suddenly become helpless. Hence, examining the washback of this high-stakes examination on the practices of teachers and students is noteworthy as it is under-

researched.

Over the past decade, many educational experts have argued about conducting a reform on the baccalaureate examination, which they think is too-grammar-and- vocabulary oriented. Despite the fact that some research has actually taken place, the baccalaureate examination, from the writer's point of view, is still unsatisfactory. An analysis of the national English examination of the past three years is a good instance that more reform is still obligatory.

The form of the 2023, 2022, and 2021 Baccalaureate English exams remain exactly the same. The exam is a final written achievement test designed to measure what students already know. Even though the present (new) syllabus is designed based on CLT, the national exam is still traditional and is based on grammar rules. It is based on the standards set forth for the teaching of English in high school. The form, the content, and the tasks of the exam aim at assessing the learners' knowledge and skills in reading, vocabulary, writing, functions, and grammar. The test paper comprises three main sections: reading comprehension, language (grammar), and writing. This examination of English does not test all language skills. This may be the biggest hurdle for Moroccan teachers to be innovative and creative in teaching.

There are many formats to test the English language. The most common formats are Multiple choices (MC), completion, true/false, short answer, paraphrasing, pairing and matching, Error correction, rearrangements, cloze/modified cloze, and editing (Hughes, 1989). Generally, English language teachers have the opportunity to use all these testing techniques in the classroom to assess whether their students achieved the objective of the syllabus, or the skill tested. In my opinion, multiple choice exams are not really effective for measuring students' understanding. Since they are not based on justifications, students can gamble on any choice that can coincidentally be correct and so the assessments' results will by no means reflect students' level. The exam paper takes into consideration the syllabus distribution, time allocation, coefficient, test sections, rubrics, and grading for various streams.

With reference to the English Baccalaureate Exam Specifications, the tables below show the time allocations, coefficient, and weighting of all streams.

Table 2. Time allocations and coefficient

Streams	Coefficient	Time allocation
Arts	4	3 Hours
Humanities	3	3 Hours
Science	2	2 Hours

The ongoing testing system implemented by teachers in Moroccan schools relies only on past papers of the Baccalaureate exam model. It is crystal clear that there is not much equality between test content and the contents of the syllabi. Teachers became mere trainers of students on how to answer automatically to a typology of questions and activities that are habitually incorporated in the baccalaureate exam paper. The syllabi, intermittently, are based on the incorporation of the four language skills; but when it comes to assessment, we can notice that tests assess only two skills which are reading and writing. As Harmer (2007) suggested: "*One skill cannot be performed without another. It is impossible to speak in a conversation if you do not listen as well, and people seldom write without reading*" (p.52). Consequently, Teachers always follow the high-stake exam syllabus and teach according to that. Speaking and listening skills are not practiced in the classroom. The main focus is to get good grades on the final exam.

Design of a New English Examination

Considering the importance of washback in the English teaching/ learning situation and the mediocre results of the present English exam in Morocco, the design of a new English exam is an imperative step to enhance Moroccan students' performance in the English language. In order to ameliorate the communicative competence of Moroccan highschool students and effectively execute the reforms applied by the Ministry of Education, it is mandatory to design a national exam that more accurately reflects the prior mentioned objectives. The body of the literature review displays that the BEE has a negative washback effect on both teaching and learning since it puts emphasis on grammar and vocabulary.

To design this new form, the researcher incorporates some positive sections of the previous Baccalaureate examinations, makes some modifications to the already-existing layout, and includes new testing items. The new exam is made

up of the following 5 parts: Speaking, Listening, Writing, Reading and Language. The total score of the new exam is 50 points, different from the score of the previous exams. The score for each part is as follows: Speaking (10pts), Listening (10pts), Reading (10pts), Writing (10pts) and Grammar(10pts). Unlike the format of the existing exams, the suggested exam will be taken in two separate sessions, one session will be allocated to testing speaking and the other sessions will focus on the other parts.

As stated earlier, the first main attribute of the suggested exam is the inclusion of the speaking skill. There are two main motives for taking in a speaking test for the new exam. The first attribute is theoretical. Canale & Swain (1980) claimed that a good test should address not only the communicative competence but also the communicative performance opting for authentic contexts. The second reason is related to the belief that a speaking test will definitely have a positive impact on both teachers and students. The test consists of three parts, which are outlined as follows:

Part 1:

The test-takers introduce themselves to the assessor who then interacts with each candidate by asking questions related to different topics, such as family, daily routine and school life. Hence, during this warm-up stage, the assessment will revolve around interactional short turns of speech.

Part 2:

In this part, each learner is given a map and is asked to give directions to his pair. It is a guided speaking activity with an information gap task, and it is designed mainly to elicit longer acts of speech. It is believed that the use of information gap activities will have a

positive washback effect upon learning as it gives a degree of authenticity (a tourist asking for directions).

Part 3:

Students will choose a topic randomly and are going to talk about it individually. The topic needs to be of an appropriate level of difficulty and should target stimulating issues related to the themes mentioned in the syllabus. As far as the listening part is concerned, it includes dialogues and conversations by native speakers.

Teachers should try to implement CLT methods to help their students improve language proficiency and prepare them not only for the national exam but also for real-life situations. Moreover, The government should make frequent supervision and evaluate teachers' teaching practices in the classroom to know whether they are implementing the designed syllabus properly or not.

In order to make the assessment process more effective, learners should be given more opportunities to show the extent of their knowledge through the use of various tasks. Further studies should be conducted in the area of the washback effect on the teaching-learning process. For instance, the washback effect on learners' language learning motivation and the washback effect of the exam on teachers' motivation to implement CLT.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study succeeded in evincing the existence of backwash in the Moroccan EFL context and contributed to the scarce literature on language testing in Morocco. By analyzing the possible positive and negative washback that tests might bring about at micro and macro levels, it seems that teachers play an important role in fostering different types of washback.

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