



## Students' Perceptions of the washback Effect of High-Stakes Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate English Examination on Learning

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### **Abstract**

Examining students' impressions of the High-stakes Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate English Examination's washback effect on learning was the study's main goal. It also sought to determine whether students' academic accomplishments affected how they perceived the washback effect of the exam on their learning. A mixed-approach descriptive survey research design was used to solve the problems. We collected data via a questionnaire, targeted group discussions, and document analysis. The data was collected using random sampling from two schools: Arjo and Leka Nekemte secondary schools which are found in East Wallaga zone, Oromia regional state of Ethiopia. Using the statistical package for the social sciences version 20 to survey 94 students, descriptive and inferential statistics were employed to evaluate quantitative data. The study of the data extracted from the focused group discussions of the students was qualitatively interpreted. The results demonstrated that the students' impressions of the Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate English Examination washback on the aim of learning English, textbook content, and material choices are noted. There were no statistically significant variations on the learning objective of English and students' textbook with regard to perceptual disparities among students due to their academic achievements. On the students' selection of resources, however, there were statistically significant disparities. The results suggested that the English portion of the Secondary School Leaving Certificate has a detrimental impact on pupils' learning. Teachers should therefore complete tasks on how to encourage positive washback with their students, the Ethiopian National Educational Assessment and Examination Agency, and curriculum designers for English.

**Keywords:** *Students' Perception; Learning Purpose; Contents of Textbook; Choice of Materials*

### **Introduction**

The circumstances of language education need the use of language testing. It is crucial to both the teaching and learning of languages [1, 2]. It was mentioned in reference [3] that the three concepts of teaching, learning, and testing are so intricately linked that it is nearly difficult to work in one without continually thinking about the other. Testing of language proficiency is used for a variety of reasons, including providing quantifiable data about learners' language proficiency [4], serving as a criterion for

admission of students to higher education [5], assessing the quality of education [6], and preventing nepotism in the distribution of limited opportunities [7].

The consequential effect of testing on learning and teaching is a concept discussed as early as the 19th century, and it was the starting point for the language testers to conduct research on it [8]. In language education, the phenomenon is termed as washback [9]. Various scholars in the worldwide have made studies on the influences of tests, especially high-stakes tests, on language teaching and learning [6, 11-21]. The findings indicated that tests have an impact on the processes of teaching-learning and on the stakeholders of the examination [13, 22-24].

Studies reveal that test taker perceptions have an association with washback when it comes to students, one of the important parties in teaching-learning and testing [25-29]. The results of the tests have an impact on test-takers, either favorably or unfavorably. In other words, tests and their outcomes significantly affect each test-taker's life [5, 30-32]. In addition, some researches [33–35] have expressed worry regarding how pupils perceive the washback of high-stakes assessments in various nations. However, the research [36–43] carried out more of focused on the impact of the examination on teaching and learning methods in the Ethiopian environment. For instance, [36, 41–43] investigated how Ethiopian English language national examinations for grades 10 and 12 affected teaching and learning procedures. They claimed that the teaching and learning were found to be exam-oriented or to have a detrimental effect on teaching and learning. The execution of the current syllabus was weakened, according to a second study [40] on the Washback Effect of the Ethiopian General Secondary Education Certificate English Examination (EGSECEE). Thus, the students' perception of the influence the examination has not been given due attention to the issue. Based on the inferred gap in the stated context, the present study investigates students' perceptions of the washback of Ethiopian Secondary School Leaving Certificate English Examination (ESSLCEE) on their learning purpose of English, learning contents of students' textbook and choices of materials. Therefore, the following guiding research questions were formulated:

1. What is the students' perception of the washback of ESSLCEE on learning purposes of English language?
2. What is the students' perception of the washback of ESSLCEE on learning contents of students' textbook?
3. What is the students' perception of the washback of ESSLCEE on the choices of materials?
4. Do students of different academic achievement levels have different viewpoints about the washback of ESSLCEE on learning purposes, contents of the textbook and choices of materials?

### ***Materials and Methods***

Using a descriptive survey design, the aforementioned study topics were addressed. Such a design is thought to aid in describing the attitudes, opinions, and traits of the sample population [44–45]. It was selected primarily to learn what each student thought about the washback of the ESSLCEE. The research prioritized the research topics to be answered in order and used both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to do so. Leka Nekemte and Arjo, two public secondary schools in the East Wollega zone, are the study locations. When data were collected at both schools, a random sample of 94 grade 12 students (47 from each school) was chosen. The academic accomplishments during the previous semester were used to identify the chosen participants.

Six students from each school participated in the focus groups. Based on their eagerness to learn deep and different insights into the topic under inquiry, the discussant students were chosen (Dörnyei, 2007).

To learn more about and draw conclusions about respondents' perspectives, a questionnaire was used as one of the data collection procedures [47, 48]. FGDs with students were undertaken to support the data from the questionnaire. In order to gain authorization from the administrative entities, the study sites were

initially visited in November 2020 before any data were collected. Data collection then proceeded according to protocol. Prior to conducting FGD in March 2021, a questionnaire was distributed in February 2021.

Following the gathering of data, the presentation and discussions of the results are arranged according to the research questions that need to be addressed. While data from FGD were examined qualitatively, those from questionnaires were quantitatively assessed. In order to respond to the first three study questions, the analyses and conclusions from the student survey and FGD were presented concurrently. Data from the FGD with the students was transcribed and combined with questionnaire data. One-way ANOVA was used as an inferential statistic to address research question number four. The results of both quantitative and qualitative data analysis were then discussed, and conclusions were drawn.

Through reviewers (researchers with PhDs in TEFL and linguistics), the validity of the questions on the student questionnaire and the FGD were examined. Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate the reliability and internal consistency of the items. As a result, the items reliability of the perception questions for students was within acceptable bounds, ranging from 0.716 to 0.875. The replies on students' perception of the washback of ESSLCEE on learning purposes of English, contents of the textbook and choices of materials were tabulated and the mean score was calculated. FGD was qualitatively discussed for the aim of triangulation.

## Results and Discussions

### Students' Perceptions of the washback of ESSLCEE on their Learning Purposes of English

Ethiopian grade 12 English textbook is designed to help students improve their communicative skills (English Syllabus Grade 11&12, 2008). In line with this, teachers are expected to know the objectives of what they teach and at the same time the students should be aware of the learning purposes of the subject. Based on the assumptions, students were provided with questions (item1-5) aimed to investigate their understanding of the washback of ESSLCEE on the goal of learning of English (Table 1).

Table 1: Students' Views of the Washback of ESSLCEE on Learning Purposes of English

I	What do you think of the goal of learning English?	No.	M	SD
	To improve my communicative skills of the language.	94	3.49	0.992
	To pass examination and join university.	94	4.09	0.912
	To obtain jobs.	94	3.76	0.785
	To satisfy school requirements.	94	3.56	0.911
	To get the chance of going abroad.	94	3.62	0.963

Table 1 shows that the mean response of the students to learning English to enhance their language's communicative abilities is 3.49 ( $SD=0.992$ ). The findings suggest that pupils did not express a desire to learn the language in order to develop their skills. Less respondents agreed that studying English was necessary to meet school requirements ( $M=3.56$ ;  $SD=0.911$ ) and to increase their chances of traveling overseas ( $M=3.62$ ;  $SD=0.963$ ). On the other hand, it is clear that students agreed to take the exam and enroll in university if they received the highest average mean score ( $M=4.09$ ;  $SD=0.912$ ). According to the survey, pupils decide to study English in order to pass the test and enroll in university.

FGD made with the students substantiate the report obtained from the questionnaire. One of the Participant students (PS) forwarded his views on the issue as such:

**PS9:** “Kaayyoo ani Ingiliffa kana baradhuuf, inni tokkoffaan, qoormaata seensa yunivarsiitii nadabarsuudhaaf ga'ee ol'aanaa waan qabuuf; irra caalaas immoo gara boodaatti faayidaa ol'aanaa waan qabuuf, barnoota kana baradhee gara itti aanutti ce'uuffillee dandeettii bu'uuraas waan ta'eef baradhee xumuruf fedhan qaba jechuudha.”

[**Translation:** My first aim of learning this English is to pass university entrance exam. On top of that, the language is a base of my knowledge for my further education.]

As the extract shows, the student stated that the primary goal of learning English is to achieve a grade that will allow him to enroll in college. The speaker also mentioned that he was interested in learning the material so that he may profit from the language's proficiency in his future academic endeavors. According to the discussion report, obtaining a degree and passing the university entrance exam are the key goals. In agreement with the aforementioned speaker, another conversation participant stated:

**PS2:** “Jalqaba irratti, barnooti addunya kana irra jiru Ingiliffaan waan kennamuuf, barnootakootti akkan jabaadhuuf nagargaara. Inni lammaffaan immoo, qormaati Ingiliffaa seensa yunivarsiitii kan kutaa 12ffaa akkan qabxii gaarii itti qabaadhu nataasisa; sababni isaas, Ingiliffa hinbeeku taanaan barumsa isa kan biraa hubachuun waan natti cimudha.”

[**Translation:** First, since education in the worldwide is given in English, learning English helps me to improve my education. Second, it helps me to score better grade in Grade-12 Entrance exam because if I do not know the language, it is difficult for me to understand what I learn.]

The discussant claims that there are two key goals for his English study. The first is to obtain global academic information, and the second is to succeed on a university entrance exam. According to the results of the questionnaire and focus group discussions, students preferred learning English for their success in passing exams so they could enroll in a higher university.

### Students' Perceptions of the washback of ESSLCEE on Learning Contents of the Textbook

Students were questioned about whether they understood how the washback effect of the ESSLCEE related to the learning materials in the textbook (Table 2).

Table 2: Students' Views of the Washback effect of ESSLCEE on Learning Contents of Textbook

II	What do you think of learning contents of English textbook?	No.	M	SD
	I would like to learn all language components in the textbook.	94	2.96	
	I would like to learn language components that may appear on ESSLCEE.	94	3.91	0.771
	I would like to learn skipping contents that may not appear on ESSLCEE.	94	3.83	0.958
	As I am preparing for ESSLCEE, I am interested in learning from textbook.	94	2.72	0.885
	As I am preparing for ESSLCEE, I feel as dealing with textbook is time wasting.	94	3.67	1.061

The choice of students to acquire certain language components that may appear on the ESSLCEE was revealed to have been documented with the mean score (3.91) out of the five subcategories of the Likert Scale. With average mean values of 3.83 and 3.67, respectively, they also agreed to learn English by bypassing any material that might not be on the ESSLCEE since they believe doing so is a waste of time. On the other hand, out of the five levels of Likert, the students' replies on their preference for learning all language components that are listed in the textbook's contents have a mean value of 2.96, which is the lowest mean value. In a similar vein, students' levels of agreement to be interested in learning from the textbook when preparing for the ESSLCEE average 2.72, with strongly disagree to highly agree as the range. According to the survey, students are more likely to select to master English language skills that are likely to be on national exams.

The FGD conducted with the students supported the questionnaire's findings. One of the discussion's participants provided the following example as an example:

**PS9:** “Yeroo hedduu barsiisoti ‘textbook’ irratti hundaa’u; ‘text’iin immoo yeroo baay’ee qormaata biyyoolessaaf isa nuqopheessu miti. .... Kanaaf, ‘text’ irratti hundaa’uun badaa gaarummaa hinqabu.”

[**Translation:** Most of the time teachers teach us based on the textbook, but the textbook does not help us to prepare for entrance exam. ....So, depending on the contents of the textbook is not good.]

In the text above, the student expresses dissatisfaction with an instructor who values the activities that are mandated by the textbook's contents. This indicates that the pupils are more eager to learn specific material that may be tested on entrance exams. Another student further supported the aforementioned viewpoints in the following manner:

**PS1:** “Qabiyyeen kitaaba irra jiran jechoota haara baruuf, dubbii fi beekumsa dandeettii afaanii waliigalaa fooyyessuuf gargaara malee amma osoo kitaaba qofaa dubbisna ta’ee qormaata seensa yunivarsiitiif hinfayyadu.”

[**Translation:** The contents of the text may help us to learn new vocabularies, speaking and improve our general language skills, but if we use only the textbook, it does not help us for entrance exam.]

The participant's perspective is evident in how he feels that the textbook's material aids in the development of their vocabulary and communication abilities. Though he was hesitant to pass the admission exam by studying the textbook's contents, this made him less driven to understand everything it had to offer. For the success of the ESSLCEE, students had no faith in what they learned from the textbook, to put it briefly based on the data from the FGD.

When the data from the survey of students is combined with the findings from the focus group discussion, it can be generalized since students' awareness of the material in the textbook they had to learn is influenced by the washback of the ESSLCEE. The conclusion suggests that there is a washback impact of ESSLCEE on students' perceptions of the learning contents of the textbook. This particular study supports the hypothesis put forth by Alderson and Wall [10] that a test will affect attitudes toward the subject matter of learning.

### Students' Perception of the Washabck of ESSLCEE on Choices of Materials

Students' views on the use of additional materials in relation to ESSLCEE were identified. The data from student participant indicate as they have common views on the issue (Table 3).

Table 3: Students' Views of the Washabck of ESSLCEE on Choices of Materials

III	What do you think learning from additional materials other than textbook?	No.	M	SD
	I choose to learn from materials that have relevance with the textbook.	94	3.30	
	I choose to learn from commercially produced materials that have relevance with ESSLCEE.	94	3.79	0.620
	I choose to learn from newspapers, magazines, audio and video recorded materials prepared English version.	94	2.95	1.167
	I choose to learn from materials reflect ESSLCEE formats and contents.	94	4.12	0.653
	I don't want to learn from any other material; textbook is sufficient.	94	2.38	0.689

The preferences of the students using supplemental materials were covered in items 11 to 15. The respondents ( $M=3.30$ ) said that they were hesitant to agree or disagree with the statement that they should learn from materials that are relevant to the topics of textbooks.

On the other hand, the sufficiency of the students' textbook (item 15) had the lowest mean score (2.38). The mean score is 4.12, which is the highest mean value, in response to the students' decision to learn from materials that reflect the ESSLCEE forms and contents (item 14). In a similar vein, when questioned (item 12) about their preference for learning from commercially generated materials that are relevant to the ESSLCEE, students gave a mean score of 3.79 as their response. Although the student responses indicated that they were in favor of learning from ESSLCEE-focused resources, they also indicated that they disagreed ( $M=2.38$ ) with the choice of learning from English-language newspapers, periodicals, audio, and video

recordings. The respondents indicated that they were in favor of selecting materials that included questions and formats comparable to those used in the ESSLCEE, as seen by the mean score for all five items.

The FGD conducted with the students was more impressive than the results of the survey. The extracts below serve as an example and are adequately convincing:

**PS4:** “Lamaan isaa osoo walbira qabanii nubarsiisanii gaariidha malee qabiyyee isa kitaaba irraa fixuudhaaf isa duwwee irra nubarsiisuu hinqabani. Kitaaba isa kan barataa fi kitaabota gara fuula duraatti qormaataaf nugargaaran walbira qabuun nubarsiisuu qabu.”

[**Translation:** It is better if our teachers teach us relating the contents of the textbook with books that contains entrance exam related questions. It is not good to rush to complete the contents of the textbook.]

Regarding the PS4, she was curious about an instructor who related the textbook to other books that were written with entrance exam questions as their primary focus. She emphasized that it is inappropriate to cover the textbook's content in haste. Her biggest issue is trying to connect the textbook's subject to the materials needed for the entrance exam. Similar to this, PS11 reported that:

**PS11:** “‘Textbook’ fi ‘mateeriyaaaliin qormaata ‘enterance’ waliin walitti hidhata qaban walbira qabamaa osoo baranee gaariidhan jedha. Yeroo nuti qabnu gabaabaa gatii ta’eef, hamma ta’ee yoo wanti ijoo ta’e waliin madaalamee barsiifame gaarii ta’an jedha.”

[**Translation:** I think it is better if we learn relating textbook with entrance exam related materials. Since we do have short time, it is better if we learn the main points.]

What PS4 already said is supported by PS11's reaction. He claimed that connecting textbook lectures to items linked to admission exams improves learning. Further supporting the aforementioned points is PS8, one of the group discussion members, who says:

**PS8:** “Maateeriyaaalii dabalataa fi kitaaba barataa walmadaalchisanii barsiisuun barataaf bu’aa guddaa qaba. Inni tokkoffaan qormaata ‘enterance’ darbuuf hanga ta’etti ... isa waliin wal-madaalsisuun nubarsiisuun gaariidha jedheen yaada. ‘Textbook’ qofa akka hintaane, kitaaba akka ‘extreem’ fidanii nubarsiisuu qabu.”

[**Translation:** Teaching by relating the textbook with supplementary materials is very useful for students. Since the primary thing is to pass entrance exam ... teaching comparing with entrance exam is advisable as to me. The teachers should teach us from the book like ‘Extreme’; it should not be only from the textbook.]

The 'Extreme English Series' and other materials used by students to prepare for entrance exams are found to be superior to and more beneficial than textbooks. Here, the student report confirmed that the respondents' selection of materials was more geared toward ESSLCEE questions than toward achieving the syllabus's learning objectives.

The results of the survey and focus group discussions demonstrate that students were more eager to learn from supplementary materials that focused on the themes and structures of the ESSLCEE questions. The analysis revealed that the washback of ESSLCEE may have an impact on how students feel about their choice of educational resources.

In conclusion, the results of the discussions made about students' perceptions of the purpose of learning English, textbook content, and material selections show that the impact of ESSLCEE is noted.

## Differences among Students in Academic Achievement

Oromia Regional Educational Bureau of Ethiopia prepared students' academic achievement report card with the scale which has five categories: 'Excellent' (90-100%), 'Very Good' (80-89%), 'Satisfactory' (60-79%), Fair (50-59%), Poor (<50). The summary of the participants' semester score is provided as below (see Table 4).

Table 4: Distribution of Student Participants with their Achievement Score Range

Achievement Scale	Achievement Score Range	Frequency	Percent
Poor	<50	0	00.0
Fair	50-59	25	26.6
Satisfactory	60-79	43	45.7
Very Good	80-89	19	20.2
Excellent	90-100	7	7.4
	Total	94	100.0

The information is useful in determining whether participants' perceptions of one another's academic accomplishments differ significantly. The category was not included in the analysis since there were no student respondents who received a score of less than 50 and were labeled as poor.

It is supported by the results under the heading that students perceived entrance exam as more important. The fourth research question is to determine if students' perceptions of the washback effect of ESSLCEE change statistically significantly based on their academic success.

Based on their classification of academic accomplishment, students' perceptions of the ESSLCEE washback were given a mean score that ranged from fair to exceptional. Based on the themes organized using one-way ANOVA individually, the data were computed. The test was run under the prescribed conditions, which were calculated and met.

Table 5: ANOVA Test Result of Items on Students' Views of Washback of ESSLCEE on Learning Purposes

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	5.975	3	1.992	.660	.579
Within Groups	271.482	90	3.016		
Total	277.457	93			

Because of their academic achievements, students' perceptions of the washback effect of ESSLCEE on the goals of English learning were compared using a one-way between-groups analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA). As a result, there is no statistically significant difference in how students perceive the impact of ESSLCEE washback on their academic performance,  $F(3, 93) = .660, p > .05$ .

Table 6: Test Result of Items on Students' Views of Washback of ESSLCEE on Contents of the Textbook

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.474	3	.825	.147	.931
Within Groups	504.516	90	5.606		
Total	506.989	93			

The above table's findings show that there are no statistically significant differences between the student groups' academic performance on related thematic group questions, which reflect the washback effect of ESSLCEE on students' perception of learning the contents of the textbook as the significance value is greater than .05. According to statistics,  $F(3, 93) = .147, p > .05$ .

Table 7: ANOVA Test Result of Items on Students' Views of the Washback of ESSLCEE on Choices of Materials

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	174.016	3	58.005	9.137	.000
Within Groups	571.356	90	6.348		
Total	745.372	93			

Regarding students' views of the washback effect of ESSLCEE on choices of materials, one-way between-groups analysis of variance was computed. The result showed that there is statistically significant difference among students in their academic achievements at  $F(3, 93) = 9.137$ , Sig value is = .000 which is less than .05. Thus, post-hoc test was conducted to identify where the difference lies.

Table 8: Post-hoc test results of students' views of washback of ESSLCEE on choices of Materials

(I) Achievement	(J) Achievement	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
<b>Fair (50-59)</b>	Satisfactory (60-79)	-.263	.634	.982	-2.07	1.54
	Very Good (80-89)	-2.924*	.767	.004	-5.11	-.74
	Excellent (90-100)	-3.811*	1.077	.008	-6.88	-.74
<b>Satisfactory (60-79)</b>	Fair (50-59)	.263	.634	.982	-1.54	2.07
	Very Good (80-89)	-2.661*	.694	.003	-4.64	-.68
	Excellent (90-100)	-3.548*	1.027	.010	-6.47	-.62
<b>Very Good (80-89)</b>	Fair (50-59)	2.924*	.767	.004	.74	5.11
	Satisfactory (60-79)	2.661*	.694	.003	.68	4.64
	Excellent (90-100)	-.887	1.114	.888	-4.06	2.29
<b>Excellent (90-100)</b>	Fair (50-59)	3.811*	1.077	.008	.74	6.88
	Satisfactory (60-79)	3.548*	1.027	.010	.62	6.47
	Very Good (80-89)	.887	1.114	.888	-2.29	4.06

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

As a result, in accordance with ANOVA standard, a column labeled "Mean Difference" with an asterisk (\*) was utilized to indicate where mean differences between the five groups were examined. As a result, the opinions of fair achiever students compared to very good and excellent achievers, satisfactory achiever students compared to very good and excellent achievers, very good achievers compared to fair and satisfactory achievers, and excellent achievers compared to fair and satisfactory achiever students differ significantly. In general, students' perceptions of the impact of the ESSLCEE on their learning varied by a mean amount. Regarding the textbook's learning objectives and English language content, the discrepancies were inconsequential.

## Conclusions

The study's goal was to investigate how students thought the ESSLCEE's washback effect affected how they learned the material. Four research questions were framed to address the study's goals. These included how students perceived the impact of the ESSLCEE on English learning objectives, textbook content, material choices, and the statistically significant difference in how students perceived the impact of the ESSLCEE on their learning based on their academic performance.

Given that it included both quantitative and qualitative data, the study used a mixed-methods approach using a descriptive survey design. Information was gathered via a questionnaire and FGD. All of the information was gathered from Oromia Regional Satate, Arjo, and Leka Nekemte secondary schools in the East Wollega zone. Chronbac's alpha coefficient was used to statistically compute and assess the reliability of the survey items for the pupils. Language specialists and academics in the field were given the



items for their feedback in the validity case. The study's findings were briefly reviewed in light of the interrelated research questions. In the end, triangulation was done using all the data collected by the devices. The results demonstrated that ESSLCEE had an impact on students' perceptions. The findings of the one-way between-group ANOVA revealed mean variations in academic performance between the four groups of students for the three factors of textbook content, learning objectives for English, and material preferences. However, there is a noticeable distinction between students who receive fair-satisfactory grades and those who receive very outstanding or exceptional grades in terms of how they view the impact of the ESSLCEE on the selection of materials.

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