

Exploring the Underlying Influences of School Curriculum and Assessment on the EFL Classroom

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Abstract

In many English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts, a misalignment exists between national curriculum objectives and high-stakes assessments or tests in English learning. While English curriculum objectives overall lay emphasis on balanced skill development and communicative competence, standardized English exams mainly assess reading, grammar, and writing, as well as test-taking skills. This incongruence forces school EFL teachers to prioritize test preparation over fostering real-world language use, leading to a phenomenon known as washback. Consequently, students often attain their education with some test-taking skills and strategies but with restricted communicative ability. To address this issue, several strategies have been proposed, including integrating listening and speaking assessments at a national level and implementing teacher-driven continuous assessment. Additionally, providing direct written feedback instead of numerical scores and incorporating alternative assessments such as drama, role-plays, and presentations can enhance learners' speaking proficiency. Collaboration among teachers in developing meaningful assessment tools further reinforces alignment with curriculum goals. By adopting these measures, school EFL education can move toward a more balanced, communicative approach.

Keywords: Assessment; Communicative competence; EFL classrooms; English curriculums

Introduction

In various EFL contexts today, there is a clear mismatch between national curriculum goals and high-stakes assessments, which significantly impacts students' academic and professional futures. Most of the national curriculum objectives state that the content of learning should be clearly topic-based and all four language skills are developed equally and language chosen is functional, relevant and realistic for learners. Moreover, in many conventional EFL settings, their national curriculums aim to have learners develop an understanding of and competence in spoken English, and communicate fluently and accurately with other speakers of English. However, a large proportion of the marks for the English national and localized exams are given for reading comprehension, grammar, vocabulary and writing. This means that English assessment results play a very important role for learners within many state or public systems all over. It is also interesting to note that more and more EFL contexts embrace what Ball (2003) calls a performativity culture in which learners' test results in schools are used to measure or assess teachers, schools as well as effectiveness of learning. In such situations, the mismatch would strongly influence the extent to which the teaching and learning behaviors can become observable in classrooms where assessment through tests and scoring high in them prioritize teaching and learning English to develop learners' communicative competence and overall communication skills espoused by national curriculum goals.

Cultural Misalignment in curriculum and assessment

Curriculum goals which encourage skilled performance are usually adopted from western educational contexts (Lou & Noels, 2018). Thus, they are not usually aligned with the education cultures in many EFL countries around the world particularly in Asia. In such cultures, learning is often seen as absorbing a body of information, being very passive in nature, with little emphasis on its application or practicality. Learning English is thus considered to consist of learning a body of knowledge like any other course and standard language pedagogy entails a one-way transmission or communication of knowledge to learners. Culturally, Asian learners appear to be mere receivers of knowledge and expect to be spoon-fed and are less spontaneous in classrooms (Wong, 2004). These students usually prefer the didactic style of teaching and show respect for the wisdom of their teachers. The fear of losing face thus makes the western participative approach of learning less conventional (Chan, 1999). Within such contexts, EFL learners' objective for learning English is to mainly pass English tests, and the assessment of learning assumes that there will always be

one correct answer to any question. Consequently, assessment based on multiple choice questions that focus on filling a gap with the only correct answer or correctly understanding the information presented in a reading text, would befit the existing culture of teaching and learning. It is the kind of learning, teaching and assessment that appears inconsistent.

It is undeniable that the lack of consistency between curriculum goals and their assessment creates a strain for EFL teachers who would be bewildered about where to focus their efforts. They realize that the curriculum expects learners to develop skills, but the tests focus on knowledge. EFL teachers feel that they must cover what is likely to be in the tests because learners, parents and often their school directors see satisfying test results as more important than successfully achieving curriculum goals. As a result, EFL teachers have to spend more time preparing their learners for high-stakes exams than on providing opportunities for developing communication skills. In education, this is relevant to what is known as washback which describes how assessments influence teaching and learning (Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun, 2022). Effects of testing on test takers' lives and on society are also taken into account. Washback undoubtedly influences both teaching and learning approaches as it affects the way teachers teach and how students learn. As for EFL learners, learning English for them, becomes increasingly less enjoyable. These learners can finish school having passed the English assessment, knowing utterly about English but having limited communicative skills that are actually necessary to be successful in their future careers.

In the case of the Thai context, according to Phothongsunan (2019), the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), seeing learners as the core of learning, has had a major influence on English curriculums across the nation. However, it is pervasive to see that the teaching of English, directed by the national curriculum goals, by and large, still emphasizes grammar, vocabulary and reading skill development and that learners' goals of learning are largely shaped by grammar-focused exams.

These washback effects are found in other EFL contexts as well (Şenel, & Tütüniş, 2013) including Hongkong and Vietnam. Chak (2023) researched the washback of the Hong Kong Diploma of Education Examination (HKDSE) with secondary school students to identify possible biases in strategy choices influenced by examinations. Students reported recognizing the washback of the examination on their learning strategies and cast doubt on high stakes exam's effects on authentic English learning. The participants' overall impressions revealed irritations and contradiction between the study of English, and exam focused pressures. Doan & Piamsai (2025)

undertook a study to explore the washback effects of a localized test on students' learning strategies in Vietnam. It was found that most students pointed out that the test affected their English learning strategies and that preferences for specific strategies emerged because of it. These studies show that washback indeed has some impact on the way English is taught and learned in schools.

How can this issue be mediated?

Some of the feasible solutions are suggested as follows:

1. National-level reforms

One potential way to solve this is to initiate a doable curriculum goal at a national level that requires all state system learners' speaking and listening skills to be nationally assessed, as having successfully been implemented in Sri Lanka recently. The planning to achieve this goal should be coherent. First, there is a need to have sufficient time to plan and prepare for this assessment change. The preliminary years of the preparation period should focus on teacher training, preparation for and provision of teacher training as this would enable all school EFL teachers to receive necessary training on teaching speaking and listening effectively before learners are to be assessed. The importance of the speaking element can be supported by having some required English lessons weekly, just for speaking and listening skill development. Ample time should also be spent on developing resources for teaching oral skills and on raising awareness of what is to come, oral skills, to be soon assessed. In addition, school directors need to receive English language training to enable them to participate in the initiative properly. Indeed, the goal should be made clear that it is not about achieving native English speaker proficiency but to speak English communicatively, enabling communicative competence in English. However, from a language teacher perspective, it is arguable that despite the inconsistent content and format of national assessment, there is almost nothing that individual teachers or groups of teachers can do to enable learners to meet the curriculum goals of developing some language skills.

2. Teacher-led strategies

Building on this idea, scholars from around the world explained the possibilities that can arise when individual teachers feel able to make a commitment to some form of continuous assessment (Playfoot et al. 2022). This would allow the assessment at different phases of learners' knowledge and performance, taken at different times during the assessment period, to contribute to learners' final grades. Assessing through such multiple phases of learner knowledge

and performance helps to improve assessment reliability and validity and surely lower learners' stress by lessening the importance of the final exam, which in some learning contexts can account for over 50 % of learners' overall marks (Fink, 2013).

Another approach proposed by some educators is to provide learners with written feedback rather than numerical marks (Newton et al. 2012). The teachers' aim here is that assessment should support learning by informing learners about their progress, their strengths and weaknesses and through the feedback, provide them with sufficient input to make plans to further improve their learning of how to use English. It has also been suggested that individual teachers could assess their own learners' oral performance. Teachers can carry out assessments based on their observation of learners' speaking skills throughout their course of study. Alternatively, in Indonesia, creative teachers have developed good reasons for learners to use spoken English and informally assess them (Nanda, 2016). They encourage the use of drama or role plays in the classroom or through presentations in which learners report back to their classmates on the outcomes of community projects that they have participated in.

3. Collaborative initiatives

In some productive EFL environments, teachers may be officially invited to help design assessment instruments for learners at different levels, primary, secondary and tertiary. There have also been reports that teachers work together in teachers' networks to develop assessment instruments that truly reflect the core of the curriculum of their learners (Khotimah et al., 2024).

Conclusion

There is inconsistency between curriculum goals and high stakes test content and formats in many EFL contexts around the world especially in Asian contexts. Given the important role of assessment results in all national education systems and rising concerns among parents and students for good marks, this inconsistency means that what can be seen happening in most state English classrooms often bears little relationship to success in the stated English curriculum goals. In addition, EFL teachers' jobs have become even more stressful as they try to meet the conflicting demands of the curriculum and the assessment system and despite successfully passing exams, learners' performance outcomes remain rather disappointing and below par. Assessment is not going to vanish and the mismatch between performance-based curriculum goals and many cultural beliefs about the nature of knowledge and how it should be assessed will remain to be seen. However, through planning and implementation of national assessments as proposed in this

paper, efforts made by those concerned, particularly teachers, can help align assessment to curriculum goals and give rise to alternatives. Moreover, future research should explore the long-term impact of assessment-driven reforms and the role of teacher autonomy in bridging the curriculum assessment gap.

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