



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***PERCEPTIONS OF STANDARDIZED ENGLISH EXAMINATIONS,
PRESSURE TO IMPROVE SCORES, AND EFFECTS ON CLASSROOM
PRACTICES AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS IN MALAYSIA***

NOOR ASMA IFFAH BINTI ZAKARIA

FPP 2014 40



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By

NOOR ASMA IFFAH BINTI ZAKARIA

**This thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia,
in fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science**

January 2014

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment
of the requirement for the degree of Master of Science

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January 2014

Chairman: Associate Professor Arshad Abdul Samad, PhD

Faculty: Educational Studies

This study surveys English language (n=244) teachers' perceptions of standardized English examinations, pressure to improve students' scores and how these factors have affected their classroom practices. In this study, the classroom practices are determined by four variables which are; (i) test preparation activities, (ii) mode of instruction employed in English class, (iii) content/areas covered during English lesson, and (iv) teachers' involvement in motivational practices. Responses were analysed by using Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) to determine whether there are any significant differences in terms of the classroom practices and the perceptions and pressure subgroups. This study found that teachers have moderate to positive perceptions towards the examinations. However, the type of questions and coverage of content in the standardized English examinations have been taken into consideration in their classroom practices regardless of their differential perceptions towards the examinations. This study also found that there are significant differences in terms of the test preparation activities, content and motivational activities according to the teachers' levels of pressure to improve students' scores in standardized English examinations.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi syarat untuk ijazah Master Sains

**PERSEPSI TERHADAP PEPERIKSAAN BERPUSAT BAHASA INGGERIS
DAN TEKANAN DALAM MENINGKATKAN SKOR MURID SERTA
KESANNYA TERHADAP AMALAN DALAM KELAS DI KALANGAN
GURU SEKOLAH MENENGAH DI MALAYSIA**

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Kajian berbentuk tinjauan ini mengkaji persepsi guru Bahasa Inggeris (n=244) terhadap peperiksaan berpusat bahasa Inggeris dan tekanan mereka dalam meningkatkan pencapaian murid serta bagaimana factor-faktor ini memberi kesan terhadap amalan di dalam kelas. Dalam konteks ini, amalan dalam kelas diwakili oleh empat pemboleh ubah, iaitu: i) aktiviti persediaan prapeperiksaan ii) cara pengajaran guru iii) skop soalan peperiksaan iv) penglibatan guru/peranan guru dalam aktiviti motivasi murid. Data kajian dianalisis menggunakan Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) untuk menentukan sama ada terdapat perbezaan yang signifikan antara amalan dalam kelas bagi subkumpulan berdasarkan persepsi dan tekanan guru. Hasil analisis menunjukkan para guru mempunyai persepsi positif pada tahap sederhana terhadap peperiksaan berpusat bahasa Inggeris. Namun begitu jenis soalan dan skop soalan peperiksaan diberikan perhatian ketika melaksanakan amalan dalam kelas, tanpa mengira persepsi yang berbeza terhadap soalan peperiksaan. Kajian turut mendapati perbezaan yang signifikan dalam aktiviti persediaan prapeperiksaan, skop soalan peperiksaan dan aktiviti motivasi murid berdasarkan tahap tekanan guru untuk meningkatkan tahap pencapaian murid ketika peperiksaan.

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Finally, my thanks go to all people who have supported me to complete the research work directly or indirectly.

I certify that a Thesis Examination Committee has met on 24 January 2014 of viva voce to conduct a final examination of Noor Asma Iffah binti Zakaria on her thesis entitled “Perceptions of Standardized English Examinations, Pressure to Improve Scores, and Effects on Classroom Practices among Secondary School Teachers in Malaysia” in accordance with the Universities and University Colleges Act 1971 and the Constitution of the Universiti Putra Malaysia [P. U. (A) 106] 15 March 1998. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Master of Science.

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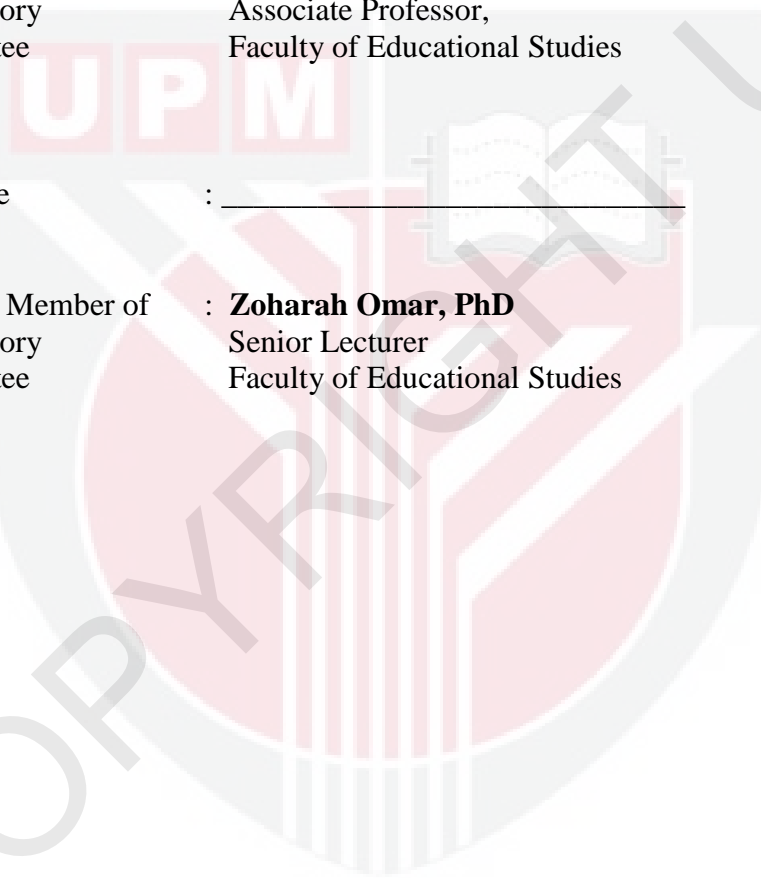
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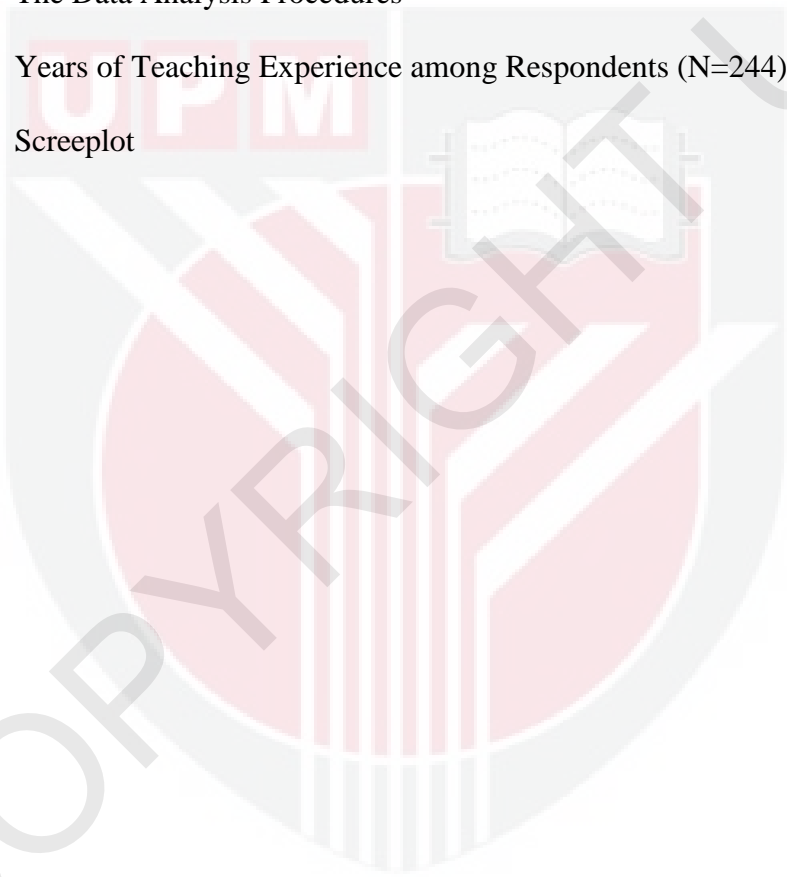


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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

SEE	: Standardized English Examinations
MPP	: More Positive Perceptions
LPP	: Less Positive Perceptions
MP	: More Pressure
LP	: Less Pressure
EFA	: Exploratory Factor Analysis
UPSR	: Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah [Primary School Achievement Test]
PMR	: Penilaian Menengah Rendah [Lower Secondary Examination]
SPM	: Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia [Malaysian Certificate Of Education]
STPM	: Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia [Higher Malaysian Certificate For Religious Education]
KBSR	: Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Rendah [Integrated Primary Schools Curriculum]
KBSM	: Kurikulum Bersepadu Sekolah Menengah [Integrated Secondary Schools Curriculum]



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Standardized examinations are a common feature of education systems in many countries including Malaysia. Popham (2005) stated that they are any tests which are administered, scored and interpreted in a pre-determined manner. Standardized national examinations, which are also referred to as high-stakes examinations, have long been used to report students' achievement to parents, policy makers, general public as well as students themselves. The numerical scores obtained from the examinations are attached to various significant implications such as students' overall performance, teachers' quality, schools' effectiveness and students' future pathways. In this context, teachers are viewed as accountable to produce good scorers in the examinations. Such a situation put teachers in a stressful position which might encourage them to focus their teaching on examinations.

Standardized testing is a common feature of education systems in many countries including Malaysia. The tests have long been used to report students' achievement to parents, policy makers, general public as well as the students themselves. In the recent decades, however, the attention given to the standardized examinations have increased dramatically. Since then, the examinations have been attached to some kind of commonly understandable expectations. The numerical scores obtained from the examinations reflect the students' capability in the respective areas and will also determine their future pathways. Thus, they are considered high-stakes examinations. This situation has consequently influenced teaching and learning activities in various ways.

This study has two key objectives. The first is to investigate teachers' perceptions of standardized English examinations and pressure to improve students' scores in the examinations. Then, the study also seeks to explore the relationship between teachers' perceptions and level of pressure and the classroom practices used. In conducting this study, the researcher has limited the classroom practices to the modes of instruction employed during English lesson, content covered during English class, test preparation activities and motivational practices in relation to the standardized examinations.

Chapter one begins with the background of the study followed by the statement of problem and the purpose of study. Several research questions are then stated and the key terms which are used throughout the study are operationally defined. Lastly, the significance of this study is explained followed by the limitation of the study.

1.2 Background of the Study

Standardized examinations have been a feature of the Malaysian education system for many decades. Prior to the discussion on the standardized examinations in Malaysian context, it is important to be acquainted with the background of the Malaysian education system and where standardized examinations stand in the system.

The education system in Malaysia is very centralized in almost all aspects including the selection of teachers, curriculum and syllabus, textbooks and also assessment. Curriculum planning and development have been conducted at the federal level and the national education system is centrally administered (Rahimah, 1998). This centralisation becomes a vital mechanism to ensure that all government policies are implemented through the education system (Government of Malaysia, 1976).

This section of Chapter 1 covers the discussion on English as a second language in the Malaysian education system and standardized examinations in Malaysian schools. It also explores the relationship between standardized examinations and teachers' classroom practices.

1.2.1 English as a Second Language in the Malaysian Education System

Prior to achieving independence, there were separate schools with different medium of instruction, curricula, methods and standards of education for the three dominant ethnic groups: the Malays, Chinese and Indians (Ministry of Education, 2001). There were also English-medium schools established by the British colonial government. Free education was only provided by the government in Malay vernacular schools (Ong, 2010). The Mandarin and Tamil languages were used in Chinese and Tamil-medium schools which were set up by their respective communities. Secondary schooling was only available in the English-medium and independent Chinese schools. Malay-medium and Tamil-medium education were limited to primary education and students from these schools continued their education in English-medium schools (Ong, 2010).

After independence, the national education system was established where the diverse school system was consolidated into a single and cohesive system. The National Education Policy was developed based on two reports which were the Razak Report and the Rahman Talib Report. These reports emphasized national unity as a foundation of the national education system to ensure the well-being and interests of the multiracial Malaysian society. In conjunction with the new policy, all primary schools were converted to either national or national-type schools, and English and Chinese secondary schools were converted to national-type secondary schools (Ong, 2010). The Malay language was declared as the only national language in 1967 and was made a compulsory subject in all national and national-type schools. In national schools, the medium of instruction was Malay, and in national-type primary schools, the medium of instruction was English. The Malaysian Certificate of Education was also conducted in Malay only.

Today, Malay language is the medium of instruction in all national schools and a compulsory subject in the national-type schools. English, on the other hand, is taught as a second language in all national and national-type schools. A major transition occurred in 2003 when the government implemented a policy of teaching science and mathematics in English for Primary one, Form 2 and Lower 6. The rationale of this implementation was to improve the mastery of English since it is viewed as an important mechanism in the field of science and technology. However, the Education Ministry has reversed the policy to the use of Malay, Chinese and Tamil due to pressure from mother tongue language groups (Ong, 2010).

Realising the role of the English language, the Third Malaysia Plan (1976) states the Malay language as the basis for national integration but measures need to be taken so as to ensure English is taught as a strong second language (Government of Malaysia, 1976). The rationale for the maintenance of English was “to keep abreast of scientific and technological developments in the world and to participate meaningfully in international trade and commerce” (Government of Malaysia, 1976). As stated by Rahimah (1998),

“Curriculum changes mainly took the form of adapting the curriculum to the changing needs of the nation, specifically adapting the syllabus, that is content of subjects to be taught, to fulfil the development needs of the country.”

(Rahimah, 1998 p. 12)

In the National Language Policy which was implemented in 1970, English language was regarded as a second language. In conjunction with the implementation, common content, syllabus, materials and methodology were used in the teaching of English language as a subject in schools and would lead to a common examination. The structural-situational syllabus was adopted at the national level including all primary national schools and also National-type Tamil and Chinese primary schools starting from 1971. As an extension, the structural-situational teaching of English was also used in Form 1 until Form 3. In 1979, the English Language Syllabus which adopted a task-oriented situational approach was employed in the teaching of English

for Form 4 and Form 5. This approach made way for a more communicative teaching and was also called the Malaysian Communicative Syllabus. It also aimed to produce a united, disciplined and well-trained workforce.

Up until 1983, different approaches for primary level, lower secondary level and upper secondary level have been inculcated in the English syllabus: i. the structural-situational syllabus for primary schools, ii. the task-oriented situational approach for lower secondary schools, and iii. the communicative syllabus for upper secondary schools. According to Darus (2013), the differences occurred due to different ad hoc committees who developed the primary and secondary syllabus, while the Curriculum Development Centre developed the upper secondary syllabus in 1980. The rationales for implementing the Communicative Language Teaching methodology are as follows:

- (a) there was a vital need for communication
- (b) the service sectors needed a workforce that was versatile in international communication
- (c) English gained importance in mid-1970s when 90 percent of Form 5 school leavers entered the job market.

(Saadiyah Darus, 2010 p. 23)

In 1983, the Integrated Primary Schools Curriculum (KBSR) was implemented in the Malaysian education system. Later, the Integrated Secondary Schools Curriculum (KBSM) was introduced as a continuation of the KBSR in 1989. According to Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia (1989), the Integrated Secondary Schools Curriculum (KBSM) for English was a skill-based syllabus advocating Communicative Language Teaching. Lessons were integrated into four skills, which are reading, writing, speaking and listening.

1.2.2 Standardized Examinations in Malaysian Schools

The changes that have taken place in the education system are among the attempts to cater to the changing needs of the nation. However, apart from the improvement in the curriculum content, the assessment of what has been prescribed requires equal attention. According to Dietel, Herman and Knuth (1991), assessment in education should reflect the content of the curriculum and vice versa. Madaus (1988) suggested the term “curriculum alignment” to explain the relationship between curriculum and assessment which is supposed to be synchronous. Mohammad Reza, et. al (2008) further elaborated that curriculum alignment is the relationship between the curriculum content and the assessment tools. It is also referred to the relationship between what is taught and what is tested. Thus, in conjunction with the changes in the English curriculum in Malaysian schools, the nature of assessment has also been affected to a certain extent.

Assessments in Malaysian schools include external standardized examinations and school-based assessments. According to the Ministry of Education (2004), the school-based assessments are conducted for Malay and English in the form of oral examinations, projects for moral education and science practical for science, physics, chemistry and biology at the school level. Meanwhile, the external standardized examinations which are also known as public examinations are administered in schools by the Malaysia Examination Syndicate (MES) and Malaysia Examination Council (MEC). These two bodies are responsible to prepare, administer, score and report test results (Ong, 2010). Among the features of standardized examinations are written tests which consist of multiple-choice items, short-answer constructed-response items, as well as essay items. Even though the education system has both standardized examinations and school-based assessment, however, standardized examinations are considered more important and dominant form of assessment. This is reflected in various aspects such as teaching, learning and preparation activities which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

All students are required to sit for standardized examinations at the end of each schooling level. There are four standardized examinations throughout the primary and secondary levels. These are the Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR) at the end of primary six, the Lower Secondary Examination (PMR) at the end of Form 3, the Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM) at the end of 11 years of schooling or Form 5, and the Malaysian Higher School Certificate Examination (STPM) or the Higher Malaysian Certificate for Religious Education at the end of 13 years of schooling (Ministry of Education, 2004). Table 1.1 indicates the four standardized examinations within the Malaysian education system.

Table 1.1: Standardized Examinations in the Malaysian Education System

Year	Standardized Examinations	Age
13	Malaysian Higher School Certificate Examination (STPM) or the Higher Malaysian Certificate for Religious Education	19
12	Religious Education <i>[Form 6]</i>	18
11	Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM)	17
10	<i>[Upper Secondary: Form 4 & 5]</i>	16
9		15
8	Lower Secondary Examination (PMR)	14
7	<i>[Lower Secondary: Form 1, 2, & 3]</i>	13
6	Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR)	12
- 1	<i>[Primary School Education]</i>	- 7
	Pre-school education	6/5

(Adapted from Malaysia Examination Syndicate, 2006)

In the context of Malaysian education, standardized national examinations; UPSR, PMR, SPM and STPM are perceived as high-stakes examinations whereby the results from the examinations are attached to various consequences such as in assessing students' performance. Various decisions including placement in the residential schools, attendance at premier science schools, and award of scholarships are made based on these results (Ong, 2010). Among those who are directly affected by this situation are the students themselves, teachers and also parents. Such an environment in the education system expects them to emphasize good performance in the examinations, which is considered the only valid measures of academic attainment.

1.2.3 The Relationship between Standardized Examinations and Classroom Practices

According to Wenglinsky (2001) teacher quality has three aspects: the teacher's classroom practices, the professional development the teacher receives, and characteristics of the teacher external to the classroom, such as his or her educational attainment. He further mentioned that, among these three aspects, the teacher's classroom practices have the greatest impact on the students' academic performance and learning development. Hence, decisions by teachers as to what to do in the classroom will most strongly affect student outcomes.

At the same time, teachers' classroom practices which include their teaching methodology and content covered during the lesson are guided by other factors such as their beliefs, expectations and experience (Richard & Freeman, 1996). In the context of high-stakes testing environment as discussed earlier, teachers seem to be significantly affected by the society's expectations of good examination results. In this situation, schools then have become a place to produce high-scoring students and teachers are expected to be the enabler to achieve it. Consequently, the classroom practices are geared towards preparing students' for the examinations.

Many studies have been conducted with regards to high-stakes tests and their impact. One of the areas which have always been controversial is the washback effects of tests. According to Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (2004), the amount and type of washback caused by a particular test depends on the status of the test, the degree to which the test counters the current teaching practices, and what teachers and textbook writers are willing and able to innovate. They further emphasized that tests that have important consequences will have washback. Thus, the relationship between the test and washback revolves around the standing of the tests and the tests results, what and how teachers teach in class as well as the source of materials related to the learning content.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Standardized examinations have been playing a vital role in various aspects of the education field. They have been used as one of the efforts to improve the quality of education. Among the strengths of using this method of assessment is its cost effectiveness. They are also valuable at the expense of teacher, student and administrator time. Herman and Golan (1990) also concluded standardized testing as a significant, positive and cost effective in educational improvement.

Although standardized testing is thought by many to benefit education in a variety of ways, however, a lot of issues have emerged in relation to this type of testing. Among others are the validity and meaning of the numerical test scores, whether the improvement in scores signals improvement in learning, and the impact of the examinations on teachers and teaching. Previous studies have indicated that consistent attention has been given to research on the impact of standardized testing on teachers and what gets to be taught in the classroom. For example, Baker (1989), Herman (1989) and Shepard (1990) as cited in Herman and Golan (1990) stated that the tests have instigated narrowness of teaching content, mismatching between curricula and instruction and negligence of higher order thinking.

The relationship between testing and teaching involves various related classroom elements and the discussion requires in depth analysis. In spite of looking at the implication of standardized examinations on teaching in an undeviating manner, it is crucial to analyse the effects on those who are involved throughout the whole teaching and learning process. For example, in the standardized testing environment, teachers are not only expected to teach the content as stipulated in the curricula, but also held accountable in making sure that their students obtain good results in the examinations by the end of the learning course. This situation has consequently triggered pressure on teachers. Further, pressure to improve students' scores is attached to the expectations from various parties including parents, administrators and mass media.

The consistent accountability pressure on teachers and prevalent attention on good grades in standardized testing environment consequently place teachers' classroom practices in jeopardy. As pointed out by Pedulla et al. (2003), the increasing demands of the standardized examinations often cause intense pressure on teachers which consequently requires them to place more emphasis on preparing students for that test.

Further, teachers are also perceived as responsible to ensure students' good performance by the end of the learning course. Such a situation has instigated a lot of stress and it does not stop there, but is in turn expressed through their teaching. As agreed by Pedulla et al. (2003), the increasing demands of the standardized examinations often cause intense pressure on teachers which consequently requires them to place more emphasis on preparing students for that test. Hence, the

expectation of the society and the status of the test which promote good scores in the standardized examinations have in turn placed teachers in a situation where they are encouraged to use the test to guide their teaching.

Apart from excessive attention on examinations by teachers due to the pressure to improve students' scores, teachers' perceptions towards the examinations play an important role in determining the extent to which their teaching is affected by the examinations. Their perceptions of the test might influence their classroom decision making. In the context of language learning, when teachers view the test as a good and thorough measure of their students' language performance, then their teaching will focus on developing their students' language skills in a larger domain as stipulated in the curriculum. However, given a situation where they perceive the examination as a mere requirement where the final scores determine not only the students' standing, but also the teachers' quality, then the classroom language teaching will be geared towards getting good grades regardless of whether it signals actual language teaching and learning.

Further, regardless of the teachers' role in preparing their students' for examinations, they might have differential perceptions of the nature of assessment that their students are sitting for. Examinations are not meant only for the grading purpose, but also to guide teaching and learning process. When teachers perceive the examinations as an accurate measure of students' performance and also a tool to guide teaching and learning, thus, preparing their students for the examinations is viewed as a part of teaching and learning process. However, if examinations are perceived as merely for grading purpose, their teaching would be geared towards achieving good grades. It would involve activities such as drilling on specific area of teaching, memorizing and narrowing down of curriculum. In this situation, whether students are actually learning, or teachers are in fact teaching for understanding is questionable.

Looking at this issue from the Malaysian perspective, standardized examinations have been a culture in the education system for years. In the Malaysian school culture, a student's performance is measured according to a numeric grading system which is based on standardized examinations such as year-end or national high stakes examinations; i.e. UPSR, PMR, SPM and STPM. It is a culture to treat examinations very seriously with teachers paying closer attention to classes that are taking standardized examinations and training students to be '*celik ujian*' (test wise). However, several reports by Husna Yusop (2006), Narjit (2003) and Ng (2008) show that the keen stress on public examinations by teachers and society has led to teaching being mainly geared towards passing these examinations. As the curriculum implementers who are accountable to teach the students in school, teachers are blamed for creating such an exam-oriented teaching and learning environment.

While it is understandable that standardized examinations is a simple means of obtaining information to make decisions, its use can also cause negative effects. For example, Hamilton (2003) stated that the high-stakes use of public examination results will eventually interfere with good instructional practices due to excessive attention given to the areas which will be tested in the examinations. Further, it encourages the adoption of teaching methods designed to prepare students for the test so as to achieve good results in the standardized examinations regardless of whether these practices promote actual learning or not.

Such practices have been documented in Malaysian classrooms for the past few years. For example, Ong (2010) mentioned that, in Malaysia, pressure is laid upon teachers to produce good results in the examinations which pressured to focus their teaching on the examinations. Further, in another study conducted by Marimuthu, Mukherjee and Jasbir (1984), the examination-oriented education system governed the teaching and learning behaviour of nearly half of the teachers and students in their study.

Apart from that, curriculum, assessment and pedagogy play their role concurrently in producing effective teaching. Given the characteristics of good and poor tests which will be discussed in detail in the literature review, the Malaysian standardized English examinations could be a good test provided that all other related aspects are implemented according to the objectives. These aspects include a thorough coverage of the content as stipulated in the curriculum and providing equal attention to the School-based Oral English Assessment (SBOEA). However, the Malaysian standardized English examinations can be a poor test when the quality of teaching and learning is jeopardized. This situation takes place when the teaching is mainly geared towards the examinations, giving too much emphasis on test preparation and allowing discrepancy between the curriculum and the test. Considering the inevitable importance of maintaining the quality of teaching in a standardized examination environment, there is a continuous need to study this phenomenon empirically so as to ensure that teaching effectiveness is synchronized with the type of assessment used in the education system.

1.4 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to examine teachers' perceptions of standardized English examinations and their pressure to improve students' scores. This study also investigates the effects of these perceptions and pressure on their classroom practices. To be more specific, the objectives of this study are to examine:

1. teachers' perceptions of standardized English examinations.

2. teachers' pressure to improve students' scores in standardized English examinations.
3. differences between teachers with less positive perceptions (LPP) and more positive perceptions (MPP) of standardized English examinations in terms of the following aspects:
 - a. test preparation activities
 - b. modes of instruction during English class
 - c. coverage of content during English class
 - d. involvement in motivational activities
4. differences between teachers who express less pressure (LP) and more pressure (MP) to improve students' scores in terms of the following aspects:
 - a. test preparation activities
 - b. modes of instruction during English class
 - c. coverage of content during English class
 - d. involvement in motivational activities

1.5 Research Questions

The research questions for this study are:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of standardized English examinations?
2. What are the levels of pressure felt among teachers to improve students' scores in standardized English examinations?
3. Is there any difference between teachers with less positive perceptions (LPP) and more positive perceptions (MPP) of standardized English examinations in terms of the following aspects:
 - a. test preparation activities?
 - b. content of instruction?
 - c. mode of instruction?
 - d. motivational practices?
4. Is there any difference between teachers who express more pressure (MP) and less pressure (LP) to improve students' scores in standardized English examinations in terms of the following aspects:
 - a. test preparation activities?
 - b. content of instruction?
 - c. mode of instruction?
 - d. motivational practices?

These four research questions were constructed to gauge teachers' perceptions on standardized English examinations and their pressure in improving their students test scores. The research questions also attempt to investigate whether or not the

teachers' perceptions of the examinations and their pressure to improve students' scores have affected their classroom teaching. The researcher believes that these four questions would help to give better understanding of the relationship between assessment and classroom teaching in a real-world context.

1.6 Significance of the Study

The study of the influence of standardized English examinations on the classroom practices as perceived by teachers will generate a number of findings and implications which will contribute to the understanding of the role of assessment in the English language subject in Malaysian schools. Olson (2002) stated that in students' assessment and testing issues, the voices of those who are implementing policies are either unheard or not heard much at all. This situation is unfortunate as agreed by Urdan and Paris (1994) who further described the reasons why the voices are important. First, tests are often used as the vehicle for changing instruction. Teachers' classroom instructions should reflect the curriculum content and should also be synchronous with the test. As further stated by Urdan and Paris (2000), the objectives and standards of the curriculum should be aligned to the assessment; therefore, the taught and the tested curriculum should be parallel. Second, test scores are used to determine teachers and schools' effectiveness as expected by the public. They are also used as the benchmark to measure teaching quality. Hence, the test scores have significant impact on teachers and what they do in the classroom. Their say and perceptions towards issues regarding testing and students' performance should be prioritized in understanding the testing culture and its impact on various aspects. Thus, as stated by Urdan and Paris (1994), there is a need for continual research on teachers' views on standardized examinations since this is the paramount of understanding of how the standardized standards and the coverage of such test influence teaching and learning and how this relationship changes over time.

In realising the importance of assessment in education, further research needs to be carried out to understand how it works in the classroom context. There has been a wealth of research on standardized tests and the impact on teaching and learning. There are also only a handful of studies focusing on teachers' perspectives of the relationship between standardized tests, teaching and learning. Specifically in Malaysia, it is important to know how teachers perceive the examinations. As mentioned in the earlier paragraph, teaching and assessment are interrelated. Thus, the way teachers view the examinations might be aligned to the way they teach in the classroom and vice versa. Hence, it is pertinent to explore teachers' perceptions of standardized English examinations and the extent to which the examinations have affected them. It also provides better understanding of how differential perceptions of the standardized examinations can give differential impacts as to what and how teachers teach English in the classrooms. The impact will be explored from the teachers' point of view in order to understand the nature of teaching and learning that has been going on in the classroom.

Apart from that, even though innovations in assessment have been introduced in the Malaysian education system in the recent decade such as the school-based assessment, standardized or national standardized examinations seems to be continually prominent. Standardized national examinations have continually been used as the sole measure of students' achievement. This situation is not only occurring within just the school environment, but has been embedded as a part of culture in the society. It is explained when the results of the examinations not only concern teachers and students, but a great deal of attention has also been given by parents and mass media. Thus, considering the role of this high-stakes examination, more studies should be conducted to investigate various aspects including the implementation and effects on classroom practices.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

This study hopes to provide an extensive overview of the relationship between the teachers' perceptions of standardized English examinations, their pressure to improve students' scores and their classroom practices. However, it might not be able to give a thorough picture of the effects in terms of the generalizability of the study due to the limited number of respondents in the study. This study focuses on the teachers' attitudes over the issue which is triangulated by their perceptions, level of pressure in relation to the standardized English examinations and teaching behaviour in the classroom. Other stakeholders also might have been significantly involved in influencing the nature of the teachers' classroom practices.

Secondly, the distribution of gender in this study is found to be imbalanced. The reasons that account for this situation are explained in detail in Chapter 3. However, it is important to note that gender is not one of the variables which are specifically examined in the intended research questions. Furthermore, there is also an imbalance of gender in the actual population of teachers in Malaysia.

Thirdly, there are many factors apart from the four elements of classroom practices which are involved in the issue of the impact of standardized examination on classroom practices, for instance, alignment of curriculum, school climate and use of test results. However, since this study concentrates only on the test preparation activities, mode of instruction, content and motivational activities, it will only describe the effects of the examinations on these factors as reported to have been practised by the teachers.

Fourthly, prior to the data analysis, the collected data was screened by using Explanatory Factor Analysis (EFA) in order to improve the construct validity of the items. As a result, there were items which were deleted due to their low rotated

matrix. Most of the negatively-coded items were also deleted. Thus, comparison between positively-coded items and negatively-coded items could not be made.

1.8 Operational Definitions

The following are the definitions of some of the important terms and phrases used in the study.

1.8.1 Standardized English Examinations

Standardized examination is a centralized public test that is administered nationwide. Every student in Malaysian public schools takes three or four standardized public examinations (Primary School Achievement Test (UPSR), Lower Secondary Examination (PMR), Malaysian Certificate of Education (SPM), Malaysian Higher School Certificate Examination (STPM) or the Higher Malaysian Certificate for Religious Education) throughout the eleven or twelve schooling years.

Standardized examinations are viewed as an external assessment because they are controlled by an independent body, the Malaysia Examination Syndicate which responsible to prepare and administer the examinations and set the standard of how the tests should be assessed. They are in charge of the whole planning, administering and analysing processes. Lim (2005) stated that results from these examinations are taken seriously by parents, students and also other stakeholders as a measure of school accountability and individual pride. She further stated that it is a common phenomenon in Malaysia whereby the mass media widely publicize the “examination results league table” with the names of outstanding schools and individual students.

In the context of this study, standardized English examination refers to the test of English in the standardized public examinations which are administered in all public schools in Malaysia. Since this study focuses on secondary schools, thus the examinations involved are the Lower Secondary Examination (PMR), the Malaysia Certificate of Education (SPM) and Malaysian Higher School Certificate Examination (STPM).

In relation to the present study, the term ‘standardized examination’, ‘standardized test’ and ‘centralized examination’ are used interchangeably. Particularly in the survey, the term ‘centralized examination’ is used since the term seems to make more sense to the respondents. This is based on the Malaysian education system in general which is found to be centralized in various aspects such as curriculum, textbooks, teaching resources and student assessment. However, the term

‘standardized examination’ is mostly used throughout this study since this term has been used in a more globalized context.

1.8.2 Washback

The concept of washback, also sometimes referred to as backwash (Biggs, 1995), covers both the nature of teaching and learning in testing situations. Generally, washback is known as the effect of testing on teaching (Djuric, 2008). Hamp-Lyons (1997) explained ‘washback’ as a set of terms that have been used in language education and language testing to refer to a set of beliefs about the relationship between testing, teaching and learning. Cheng (2003) made a clear distinction between washback, test impact and test influence. According to her, washback is the effects of language tests on micro-levels of teaching and learning, such as in terms of inside the classroom activities (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Test impact, on the other hand, involves the macro-level factor of education and society. Alderson and Wall (1993) and Messick (1996), argued that ‘washback’ is a technical term which is used to describe a “complex phenomenon” where teachers and learners do things which they would not necessarily otherwise do because of the test. Thus, the extent to which the previous studies define washback seems to vary. However, the different definitions clearly emphasize the effects of tests on classroom activities.

In relation to this present study, the focus falls on the fine distinction between washback and effects of tests. The study looks at the effects of the standardized tests on teachers in terms of their attitudes and pressure felt in relation to the test. Then, the nature of their attitudes and pressure experienced are investigated in relation to their classroom activities. Thus in this study, the effects of standardized English examinations are regarded as synonymous with the washback effects of the tests.

1.8.3 Pressure to Improve Scores

Within the context of school climate, test scores from standardized examinations have been used as a basis in making important decisions which attached to significant consequences for teachers and students, such as in terms of promotion and funding (Madaus, 1985; Herman et al. (1990). The expectations encourage teachers to limit teaching to what is tested and adapt their teaching methods in ways that are accommodating the requirements of the test. Such a situation may lead to a lot of disappointment among teachers and place teachers in a stressful situation. . Herman et al (1990) coined the term “accountability pressure” to discuss the pressure that the teachers are facing in order to make sure that their students perform well in the standardized examinations.

Previous studies have shown that there are various factors that contribute to the teachers' examination-related-pressure and their implications on teaching and learning. For example, Smith (1991) stated that apart from administrators and parents, pressure among teachers is also caused by the publication of test scores which produces "feelings of shame, embarrassment, guilt, and anger in teachers and the determination to do what is necessary to avoid such feelings".

The term pressure in this study deals with the pressure among teachers to improve scores or maintain students' excellent performance in the examinations. Based on their levels of pressure which are measured by Likert scale, teachers in this study are grouped into More Pressure (MP) and Less Pressure (LP). This study also investigates the extent to which particular sources of pressure such as school administrators, school inspectorates, parents and teachers' own expectations contribute to teachers' examination-related-pressure. Further, the respondents' classroom practices in this study are investigated in the light of their levels of pressure in making sure that their students perform well in the examinations.

1.8.4 Teacher Perceptions

Teacher perceptions of this study refer to their perceptions of standardized English examinations. One of the purposes of this study is investigate how teachers' perceptions of testing practices affect the way teachers' teach and prepare their students for the examinations. In the context of this study, teachers' perceptions also refer to how teachers view the tests in terms of its validity and usefulness of the test scores as well as the testing event itself. It also refers to how teachers perceive the tests based on the accuracy of inferences that can be made from the tests about various aspects such as quality of instruction, student learning, school effectiveness and differences among groups.

Teachers' perceptions of a particular test are pertinent to look into since they might influence other aspects of teaching and learning. Urdan and Paris (1994) stated that teachers' views of standardized tests may determine their test preparation and administration practices. The degree to which they engage in test preparation activities depends on their feelings about the test and their beliefs about how test results are used (Urdan & Paris, 1994). They further stated that

because the preparation practices that teachers use with their students can shape the results of standardized tests, and because these results are used to make important decisions in schools, it is essential to understand what teachers think about the standardized tests, and how these perceptions guide their practices.

(Urdan & Paris, 1994 p. 140)

In the study by Monsaas and Engelhard (1994) on teachers' attitudes towards standardized examinations, they found that teachers who felt that testing practices were dishonest were less likely to engage in them. Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) theory of personal actions provides a theoretical framework for examining the likelihood of teachers' engaging in ethical and unethical testing practices. This theory also assumes that the best predictor of behaviour is the intention. Behavioural intentions, on the other hand, are believed to be the function of attitudes towards the behaviour and subjective norms (Monsaas & Engelhard, 1994). Subjective norms in this context refer to the teachers' perception of the extent to which others think they should engage in particular classroom practices. Thus, according to Budd (1986), both attitude and perception are weighted equally, although one may be more salient depending on situation.

Further, in the present study, teachers' perceptions also refer to teachers' view of the tests' validity and usefulness and the accuracy of inferences that can be made from the tests about the quality of instruction and differences among groups. In order to assess whether teachers' perceptions of the standardized examinations affect their classroom practices, the respondents are divided into two groups which are Less Positive Perception (LPP) and More Positive Perception (MPP).

1.8.5 Classroom Practices

This study focuses in the differential classroom practices by the teachers based on their perceptions of standardized English examinations and their pressure to improve scores in the examinations. The classroom practices include their test preparation activities, mode of instruction, coverage of content during English class and their involvement in the motivational activities.

a. Test Preparation Activities

The nature of test preparation activities and the amount of time spent those activities has been discussed and well-documented in the previous studies. Smith et al. (1989) reported that teachers in their study spent three to four weeks of their school time on special test preparation for standardized tests, and the time spent on the preparation activities increased as the test date is approaching. Mehrans and Kaminski (1989) and Haladyana, Nolen and Haas (1991) discusses various test preparation activities which contribute to higher scores on standardized examinations. They suggested a continuum of test preparation activities from which are considered ethical to those which are considered highly unethical. Mehrans and Kaminski (1989) defined the unethical test preparation activities as "practices that increase test scores without concomitant increase in skills in the larger domain being measured". Thus, activities such as reviewing previous version of standardized examinations are viewed as cheating and inappropriate.

The discussion of the test preparation activities in the present study focuses on the amount of instructional time teachers spend on various practices which are meant to prepare their students for the standardized examinations.

b. Mode of Instruction

The term 'mode of instruction' in this study refers to the instructional strategies employed by the English teachers. This study seeks to explore the extent to which whether the teachers' mode of instruction is geared towards accommodating the format of the examinations or the targeted language skills at the larger domain. It focuses on the frequency of which a particular mode of instruction is used in the daily English lessons. In Malaysian standardized English examinations, among the format covered are continuous writing, directed writing, summary writing, reading comprehension and multiple-choice questions.

Standardized English examinations have a considerable influence on what happens in classrooms. The content and expectations of a particular test affect teachers' daily decisions about what and how to teach even in their normal daily lesson. According to Pedulla et al. (2003), the impact of test on the modes of instructions seems to depend on the format of the test. For example, greater emphasis is placed on higher-order thinking skills, particularly when the test requires written responses (Pedulla et al., 2003). Stecher et. al (2000), on the other hand, further stated that instructional methods did not necessarily change in response to state testing, however, the frequency with which teachers used certain methods did change.

Mode of instruction is one of the variables in this study. It is measured based on the frequency of different types of instructional practices during daily English lessons. For example, instructional activities which allow constructed responses, multiple-choice types of activities, cooperative group learning or extended project work.

c. Instructional Content

In daily classroom instructions, teachers make many decisions about what to teach and how. Many previous studies on assessment have targeted on the influence of the test on the focus of instruction and pedagogical methods. According to Corbett and Wilson (1991), Madaus (1998) and Smith (1991), as the importance of the test increases, the curriculum will narrow to closely resemble the content sampled by the test. Pedulla et al. (2003) reported similar findings whereby teachers are found to be giving greater attention to tested content areas.

In the context of Malaysian standardized English examinations, the content covered in the examinations focuses on reading comprehension, language accuracy and essay writing, whereas the curriculum as prescribed by the Curriculum Development Division emphasises the development of four main language skills; reading, writing,

listening and speaking. Thus, this study attempts to investigate the extent to which the content covered during English lessons has been influenced by the standardized examinations.

Instructional content is another variable investigated in this study. This variable is measured based on the frequency of which a particular area of content such as speaking and listening activities, reading comprehension, individual tasks and essay writing are used in the daily English lessons.

d. Motivational Activities

Motivational activities in educational context generally intend to motivate teachers and students to reach the targeted performance levels. The activities also attempt to encourage positive teaching and learning outcomes. However, motivational activities which have been consistently conducted on a specific area in education for example examinations may imply the degree of importance and attention given on examinations in classrooms and schools in general. With regards to teachers, Pedulla et al. (2003) and McNeil (2000) have mentioned that placing a premium on student test performance through various motivational activities has led to instruction that is focused on test preparation activities, thus limiting the range of educational experiences and reducing the instructional skills of teachers.

In this study, motivational activities are measured based on the degree of teachers' involvement in activities either at classroom or school level which meant to encourage students to perform well in the standardized English examinations. These activities might be conducted at the school or class level. Thus, it focuses more on the teachers' involvement in promoting the activities regardless of whether it is conducted at the school level or their individual class.

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