

# Chapter 23

## Impact of a National English as a Foreign Language Test on Parents in Nepal



Saraswati Dawadi

**Abstract** Despite a growing body of research on language test impact, little is known about the impacts of a test on parents. Drawing on critical language testing theory, this chapter reports on a study that explored the impact of a high-stakes secondary school national English as a foreign language (EFL) test on parents in Nepal. The data generated through semi-structured interviews with parents ( $n = 6$ ) and students ( $n = 6$ ), a student survey, and oral diaries ( $n = 72$ ) revealed that the English test had severe impact on parents. The findings indicated that social (e.g. status quo and family pressure), economic (e.g. buying preparation materials and private tuition), and psychological factors (e.g. stress and anxiety) associated with the test affected parents in complex ways. This impact, however, varied among the parents in the study which seemed to have been influenced by their educational background and their own past experiences. The final section of the chapter presents some pressing policy, research, and pedagogical implications of the study.

**Keywords** High-stakes tests · English as a foreign language · Test impact · Test anxiety · Test pressure

### Introduction

Parents are primary stakeholders of a school test because parents have a natural tendency to help their children with test preparation. Since they play a vital role in their children's education, they are vulnerable to the impacts of high-stakes test results (Abu-Alhija, 2007). However, they have been under-researched compared to other stakeholders, such as teachers and students. In fact, Rogers, Barblett, and Robinson (2016) rightly argue, "The stakeholders who have received the least attention are parents" (p. 329). Therefore, this study aimed at addressing this gap by exploring the impact of a high-stakes English as a foreign language (EFL) test on parents in Nepal.

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S. Dawadi (✉)  
The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK  
e-mail: [saraswati.dawadi@open.ac.uk](mailto:saraswati.dawadi@open.ac.uk)

This paper explored the impact of the Secondary Education Examination (SEE), previously known as School Leaving Certificate (SLC), English test on parents in Nepal, a small developing country in South Asia. The SEE, a national standardized test, is conducted at the end of 10-year school education for children aged 15–16 years old. The SEE English test is divided into two parts (reading and writing test that covers 75% and listening and speaking test 25%). While the writing test is externally controlled by the National Examination Board (NEB), a constituent organization of the Ministry of Education, Nepal, the speaking test is conducted by schools.

The SEE is a high-stakes test in the Nepalese context as it functions as a gateway to higher secondary education (Dawadi, 2018, 2020). However, there is hardly any research on the impacts of the SEE English test on parents. Therefore, the main rationale for conducting this study starts with the need to explore the nature of the impact of the test on parents in Nepal.

This paper aims to contribute to the testing literature by reflecting on the nature of a high-stakes test's impact on parents through the lens of critical language testing (CLT, explained below). A second potential contribution concerns the research methodology used in this study that can be possibly employed by future researchers. In terms of application, the research reported here can contribute to better informing schools and teachers about the nature of test impact on parents.

## **Empirical Background to the Study**

Parents are a crucial part of language testing practices. Parents, irrespective of their economic status, ethnic background, and educational level, want their children to perform well on high-stakes tests as tests are likely to bring life-changing consequences to their children's lives. Most parents take financial and caring responsibility for their children and provide all kinds of support to their children in order to better prepare their children for such tests. Therefore, parents are affected by such tests. However, little research has explored this area (Rogers et al., 2016).

Before discussing the nature of test impact on parents, it is fundamental to reflect on the extent to which parents have knowledge about high-stakes tests. As parents have a vital part to play in high-stakes test preparation practices, it might be helpful for them if they can learn what the tests include and what kind of consequences the tests can bring to their children's lives. In other words, parents should be well informed about what their children's tests mean and the level of performance of their children on those tests including possible consequences of the tests to their children's lives. If parents do not know about the nature of the tests and their possible consequences to their children, this may deter them from being supportive of high-stakes testing. However, too often parents do not seem to be well informed about their children's tests (Dawadi, 2019a). Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that many parents, particularly parents with low education, will understand the nature, the construct and the psychological impact of testing on their children. In most contexts, test

results are not explained adequately to help parents better understand their children's learning achievement. For instance, Desforges, Hughes, and Holden's (1994) study suggests that the majority of parents (i.e. 63%) in the UK have little or no knowledge of what is involved in SATs. Scott (2007) further reports that most parents in the UK have little understanding of what statutory testing usually entails and what the test information they receive actually means. Similarly, in the context of the USA, Mulvenon, Stegman, and Ritter (2005) argue that the majority of the states in the USA do not have formal policies for communicating test results to parents. So, most parents receive only some or no explanation of the test results by schools or teachers.

The literature on language testing also indicates that there are psychological impacts of high-stakes tests on parents. For instance, the parents of students, identified as at-risk of failure, expressed elevated stress in Westfall's (2010) study. Similarly, Wyn, Turnbull, and Grimshaw's (2014) study suggests that parents in Australia experience stress due to their concerns about their children's performances on National Assessment Program– Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN). Rogers et al. (2016) further argue that NAPLAN has some negative impacts on the well-being of parents and students.

However, another US study by Mulvenon et al. (2005) suggested that the majority of parents do not feel stress or anxiety associated with the SAT-9 tests. They also do not feel any pressure to prepare their children for the tests. These findings are consistent with Osburn, Stegman, Suitt, and Ritter's (2004) claim that most parents (73%) have a moderate level of anxiety and stress associated with the SAT-9 test and they did not feel pressure to help their children perform well on the test. However, some parents, particularly the parents of students who do poorly on the exams, feel pressure to help their children.

Several authors have focused on private tutoring practices for learning and test preparation in Asia and their impact on parents, particularly in East and central Asian context (e.g. Bray & Lykins, 2012; William, 2018; Yahiaoui, 2020). They discuss parents' anxiety associated with their children's performances on high-stakes tests and point out "their fear to be labeled as failed parents" (William, 2018, p.114). There are even some cases, as highlighted by Yahiaoui (2020) that if parents find out that other parents have sent their children to tuition classes, they get worried and do the same as they may feel responsible for their children's failure if they do not pay for private tuition classes. Indeed, "parents are caught between the hammer and the anvil and have to pay to secure a better career [for] their children" (Yahiaoui, 2020, p. 94).

However, very little is known about the impacts of high-stakes tests on parents in low-resourced countries like Nepal. Therefore, this study explored the extent to which the parents in Nepal have knowledge about the SEE English test and the perceived impacts of the test on parents.

## Theoretical Framework for the Study

Language assessment is a social activity which is connected to a whole set of variables that interact in society (Dawadi, 2019a). Hence, the true nature of assessment can be understood only by taking account of the social contexts in which it operates (Shohamy, 2001). It is likely to bring consequences to its stakeholders including parents. Foucault (1979) considers assessment to be a source of power and a disciplinary tool that can set norms to classify, qualify, and punish individuals and hold them under surveillance.

Since language tests can bring life-changing consequences to students, they have a deep influence on students' and parents' emotions and feelings (Xiao & Carless, 2013). The tests create pressure and anxiety in students and parents. However, language testing literature indicates that test impact researchers, quite for a long time, addressed only the measurement issues while overlooking the impacts of such tests on an individual's life (Dawadi, 2019a). Critical language testing (CLT) theory examines the roles of tests in society, considering tests in relation to their power and consequences in educational and social contexts (Shohamy, 2001). Shohamy views that tests should be seen as powerful tools that are directly related to levels of learner success and they are deeply embedded in cultural, social, and educational arenas. Her framework of CLT suggests that language testing is not neutral, but is shaped by social, cultural, educational, political, and ideological agendas (for a detailed discussion of CLT, please see Lynch, 2001). CLT points out that language testers need to be fully aware of the power of a test and its consequences to its stakeholders and they need to ensure that tests bring the intended impacts on stakeholders (Dawadi, 2019a). It is equally important to respect the rights of each stakeholder including parents. Thus, as argued by Shohamy (1993), language testers' role does not end in the development phase of language tests; rather they have to examine the consequences of those tests to the people involved.

In order to address the research question of the study (i.e. what are the impacts of the SEE English test on parents), I employed CLT as it enabled me to critically evaluate the nature of the test's impact on parents in Nepal. However, it is worth pointing out that the findings reported in this paper are from a large research study that explored various aspects of the SEE English test impacts in the Nepalese context (See Dawadi, 2019a for details).

## The Study

### *Participants*

The participants in this study included EFL students ( $N = 247$ , aged 15–16 years) and their parents ( $N = 6$ ) from rural Nepal. Out of the six parents, three were with high education (at least SLC/SEE graduates) but the rest of the parents were not able

to read and write. Their age ranged between 35 to 62 years and they represented different professions: farmer ( $N = 2$ ), teacher ( $N = 2$ ), stonebreaker ( $N = 1$ ), and shopkeeper ( $N = 1$ ). During the time of data collection, the students were preparing for the SEE, a high-stakes test in Nepal.

### ***Data Collection***

This study employed a mixed-method design comprising a questionnaire survey and six case studies. It is worth pointing out that considering the low literacy rate of parents in Nepal, the questionnaire survey was limited to students. However, the student survey asked the students for information about what test impact they perceived to have been on their parents in addition to themselves. This paper does not report on the test impact on students.

The six case study students were asked to audio-record oral diaries once a week intermittently for three months (first month during the usual classes, second during the test preparation time, i.e. around six weeks before the test, and the final one during the test results publication). Each of them along with their parents (one parent for each) was interviewed twice: in the pre-test (around six weeks before the test) and post-test contexts (around two months after the test results publication).

### ***Research Ethics***

The British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (2011) were followed to maintain the ethics in this study. Both children and their parents were given a full account of the project and we requested permission from children's parents for them to take part in the project. Children themselves were also directly asked whether they wanted to take part in this study. Both parents and students were informed that participation was voluntary and that all data would be treated as confidential and anonymized promptly.

### ***Data Analysis***

The study employed a thematic analysis approach to systematically analyze the data. All the interviews and oral diaries were transcribed and transferred to NVivo 10 for the analysis; students' qualitative comments in the survey were also transferred to NVivo 10. The data was looked at through the lens of CLT. As thematic analysis is a constant-comparative method, data analysis in this study involved reading and rereading the transcripts in a systematic way. To maintain necessary rigor in the analysis process, this study adopted the six-phase process as proposed by Braun and

Clarke (2006): Familiarization with the data, Generating Initial Codes, Searching for Themes, Reviewing Themes, Defining and Naming Themes, and Writing Report. Nevertheless, those analytic procedures were not a linear series of steps but rather an iterative process.

## Findings and Discussion

The key findings in this study indicated that the SEE English test had a huge impact on parents. There were three different factors associated with the test impacts on parents: psychological, social, and economic. Each of them is briefly presented below.

### *Psychological Impacts of the Test on Parents*

The test had severe psychological impacts on parents. All the parents (except P6) in this study reported that they had a heightened level of anxiety associated with the test as indicated by the quotes below:

I never got a chance to go to school and I have a painful life. Therefore, I want to see my daughter well educated and working in a good office. For this, she first has to do well in the SEE. Sometimes I feel like if in case she cannot do well in the examination, her future will be dark. This makes me really worried. (P5)

I think my parents are also very much worried about the test. (S 201)

Parents also felt elevated pressure to raise test scores: *“I feel pressure because of the test. If he cannot do well on the test, his future will be affected. So, I feel like I should support him in whatever way I can”* (P3). Moreover, the test increased parents’ workload and affected even their daily routines:

I have to get up early in the morning to wake her up and make her ready to go to tuition classes by 5.30 am. In the evening as well, I sit in her room till 11.00 pm to make sure that she is studying there. (P1)

The findings also indicated that parents were worried as they considered the SEE to be very important for their children’s career. For example, P3 mentioned:

The test is very important for his career. If he cannot do well, there will be different problems. One of the immediate problems will be associated with his higher education. For instance, as I told you earlier, he seems interested in studying science at his higher secondary level but, if he cannot get a good grade on this test, he will not be eligible to study science.

Nevertheless, individual differences could be observed in this study as two of the parents (P4, P6) did not feel any pressure because of the test: *“I do not have any kind of pressure. I know that my child is one of the best students in his class and he has been doing really well on his class tests.”* (P6).

These findings to some extent support the findings of previous test impact studies. For instance, Wyn et al. (2014) also reported that parents in Australia had elevated stress due to their concerns about their children's performances in high-stakes tests. However, Osburn et al.'s (2004) claim that the parents of the children, who were the low performers on the SAT-9, had more pressure to raise test scores than the parents whose children were high performers.

The main reason behind parents' anxiety seemed to be their perceived importance of the test on students' future career. Most parents in Nepal think that the SEE is everything for their children's career. Indeed, failure in the SEE is seen as a failure in life, and success is equated with an individual's value to the Nepalese society (Dawadi, 2019a). In other words, success in the SEE "raises their social status and the society values the individuals as its responsible member" (Bhattraai, 2014, p.59). Thus, the SEE is considered to be a landmark in an individual's life as it is believed that the examination provides the ladder for one to get higher education and also opens up the vista of developing his/her career (Giri, 2011). Almost all parents think that their children's future will be ruined if they cannot perform well in the SEE (Dawadi, 2021). Consequently, they feel anxious about their children's performance on the test. In this study, as all the students were studying in public schools in a remote part of Nepal, the majority of students had low proficiency in English. Thus, parents' anxiety might have resulted from students' low proficiency in English.

Nevertheless, individual differences could be observed in this study as two of the parents (P4, P6) did not feel any pressure because of the test. More interestingly, in a comparison between the parents of high achievers, parents with high education were found more worried about the test results than the parents with low education. One of the reasons behind this appeared to be that parents with high education had more concerns about the future consequences of the test to their children such as higher secondary school/college selection and scholarship applications. However, illiterate parents did not know much about the importance of the test in the career prospects of their children.

### ***Social Impacts of the Test on Parents***

The study indicated that the performance on the test was associated with their social prestige or their status quo. All the parents had a belief that poor performance on the test would negatively affect their prestige in their society: "*I am worried that if he cannot do well in the examination, it will be a great shame for me in my society as all the people know his results*" (P3); "*My parents will be respected more in our society if I can perform well on the test*" (S6); "*My parents tell me that it will be shameful for us in the society if I cannot perform well on the test*" (S212).

The findings provide evidence to Budhathoki et al.'s (2014) claim that Nepalese parents perceive the test as a marker of their social prestige. Therefore, they provided every possible form of support to their children for the preparation of the test. They even collaborated with their neighbors and relatives to be able to support their children

for the test preparation: “*We have requested our neighbor, who is also an English teacher, to support our daughter for the preparation of the test*” (P-1); “*I visited my auntie’s home to learn English and she helped me to answer some grammar-related questions from the question collection book*” (S5).

Since the SEE scores have been increasingly ... used by the Nepalese government as the sole criterion to judge the quality of school education, the public schools in Nepal are rewarded or penalized based on students’ performances in the SEE (Dawadi, 2019a), the public schools pressurize parents to raise the test scores. However, schools should understand that this kind of pressure creates anxiety and an economic burden on parents.

### ***Economic Impacts of the Test on Parents***

The study also observed the economic impacts of the test on parents. It was found that parents spent a significant amount of money to buy books and other materials as they tried their best to provide their children with all the materials or resources needed for their test preparation: “*I have bought whatever book he needs for the test preparation*” (P3); “*My parents bought all the necessary things needed for the test preparation*” (S18).

The survey indicated that almost all the students (95%) took coaching classes run by their school teachers and 9% of the students took some private tuition classes as well. The test put pressure on parents in such a way that most of them sent their children to tuition classes throughout the academic year.

The findings further indicated that parents had the feelings of being co-responsible for the test preparation. They reported that test preparation is a matter for students, parents, and teachers as suggested by the excerpt: “*We should not depend only on teachers. I think, we have an equal responsibility to prepare our children for the test*” (P1).

This kind of feeling might have also encouraged them to send children to private tuition classes. Nevertheless, these kinds of practices created economic burdens on parents in such a way that they had to cut off their daily bread to manage money for their children’s education: It was really heart-touching to hear the struggle of parents to manage money for their children’s extra tuition classes: “*It has been very difficult for me to manage all the cost for her education but I am ready even to have insufficient food*” (P2).

To reiterate, the SEE seems to create a huge economic burden on parents as they were compelled to pay extra money for private tuition classes and/or school accommodation.



## Examining Findings from CLT Perspectives

Looking at the findings through the lens of the first critical perspective of CLT—“an interest in particular domains such as gender, class, ethnicity, and the ways that language and language-related issues (like all human relations and activities) are interconnected with them” (Lynch, 2001, p. 263)—it is indicated that the SEE is a social process, and it has several consequences to parents, a part of the Nepalese society.

One of the main reasons behind parents’ anxiety associated with the English test seems to be their perceived importance of the English language and the SEE English test. As Bhattraï (2014) rightly points out, there has been a high demand for the English language in *Nepal*, as English has been associated with the social prestige and career progression of an individual. Similarly, the SEE has been used as a gate-keeping instrument for admission to higher education and for employment (Giri, 2011). This means that the SEE has been used as a powerful instrument to control access to higher education (Bhattraï, 2014). Therefore, Nepalese parents are worried that their children’s career progression will be affected by the English test results.

The SEE English test also serves the agendas of higher secondary schools or colleges in Nepal. Many schools/colleges use the SEE English test as an appropriate and sufficient measure of students’ English proficiency when they enroll students at Grade 11. Because of the enduring and extended use of the SEE results in the higher education context in Nepal, most parents want their children to perform well on the test and they feel pressure to raise the test scores (Bhattraï, 2014; Budhakoti et al., 2014; Giri, 2011).

The second critical perspective of CLT—“the notion that our research needs to consider paradigms beyond the dominant, postpositivist-influenced one” (Lynch, 2001, p. 263)—is addressed through the mixed-methods approach in the current study. Both the qualitative (oral diary entries and semi-structured interviews) and quantitative data (survey) were collected to create a comprehensive picture of the impact of the SEE test in the Nepalese context. Moreover, as the study sits within the interpretive paradigm, it allows for “different meanings and interpretations rather than a single absolute truth” aimed for in the dominant psychometric traditions” (Lynch, 2001, p. 363). By employing a mixture of methods and bringing both students’ and parents’ views together, the current study is better able to reflect on the nature of the test impact.

The third critical perspective of CLT—“a concern for changing the human and social world, not just describing it: the ‘transformative agenda’, with the related and motivational concern for social justice and equality” (Lynch, 2001, p. 263)—relates to our concern for hearing the voices of parents, one of the primary stakeholders of the SEE in Nepal. This study created an opportunity for parents (and students) to exercise their democratic right to be heard by the public.

CLT acknowledges that the knowledge of any tester is incomplete and limited. Therefore, there is a need for testers to rely on additional knowledge sources to obtain a more accurate and valid description and interpretation of knowledge; they

have to construct their knowledge by working together with other stakeholders of tests including parents (Dawadi, 2019a). However, as the findings discussed above indicate, the test designers hardly listen to parents' voices in the test development process in Nepal. Consequently, the test seems to have hugely negative impacts on parents. Regrettably, parents do not even seem to know that they have the right to raise their voices about the testing practices. They accept the authority of the SEE without any question.

The final critical perspective of CLT—"the requirement that critical applied linguistics be self-reflexive" (Lynch, 2001, p. 363)—concerns our own role, as a responsible member of the Nepalese society and a testing researcher, to make a critical observation of the assessment practices in Nepal. The current reality is that the Nepalese government spends very little money on educational research and almost no money on test impact research. Very similar to the Cambodian context (Moore, Stroupe, & Mahony, 2012), almost all Nepalese academics are paid for their teaching hours but they receive almost nothing for their research. Consequently, educational research is still in its infancy in Nepal (Bhattraï, 2014), and the studies that have explored test impact issues in the Nepalese context are scarce.

The argument that "academics cherish the right of 'academic freedom' to research what they like and to report their findings, whether favorable or unfavorable to their sponsors" (Moore et al., 2012, p. 61) or to the concerned authorities is fully applicable in my case. I conducted this study according to my own perception of what an impact study should comprise, have made a critical observation of the test impact issues, and then reported the findings without any fear.

## Implications of the Study

The findings indicate that the test has social, economic, and psychological impacts on parents. The test has created feelings of sadness and disappointment in such a way that some parents end up with sleepless nights. Therefore, there is an urgent need for stress management sessions and workshops for parents. For this, teachers need to be trained first (Dawadi, 2019a).

Although parents were actively involved in the test preparation and considered the test preparation as a co-responsibility of parents, students, and teachers, they have little knowledge about the test and its processes. Parental engagement in test preparation can be more effective when parents have clear, specific, and targeted information from schools (Dawadi, 2019b; Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011). As argued by Cheng, Andrews, and Yu (2010), if parents know about the nature of children's tests, it is likely that they can better support their children.

Parents can play a vital role in assessment innovation if they are well informed about the test and get a chance to be involved in the test development process. However, the findings indicated that parents neither receive information about the test nor are offered a chance to be involved in test development. Although it is not practical to involve all parents in the test development process, at least a sample

of parents should be consulted during the test development process and their views should be collected through questionnaires and interviews.

To lower schools' pressure on parents related to the test, the SEE scores should not be used as the sole criterion to judge the quality of schools, and the test results should not be given so much importance, rather students' skills to use the language communicatively should be highlighted. It is better to follow the French practice, as Black and William (2005, p. 253) argue, students' scores on external high-stakes tests are not used as a way of monitoring schools' standard or quality, rather all aspects of educational provisions including classroom practices, resources, and facilities for students, and teachers are monitored by the MOE through focused surveys.

The study indicates that parents consider that their children's poor performances on the test diminish their social prestige. This is the result of the current practice that schools and the NEB publicize the test scores without paying due attention to the confidentiality of each individual student. It is unfortunate to see that some schools even display individual students' scores along with their pictures in public places to attract potential students, a common phenomenon among private schools as seen in big cities. This practice creates more pressure and anxiety in students and parents. Therefore, careful measures, such as maintaining confidentiality in the publication of the results, need to be taken by schools and NEB.

## **Limitations of the Study**

The study reveals interesting findings with regard to the impacts of a high-stakes test on parents. However, the study has two major limitations. The first limitation of the study concerns its sample size. As this study was limited to 247 students and six parents in Nepal, generalization of the findings is limited by this constraint. The second limitation of the study concerns the type of parents included in this study. All the parents in this study were from public schools in a remote part of Nepal. Therefore, this study cannot capture the voices of private school parents.

## **Recommendations for Future Research**

Though this study was mainly interested in how parents in an EFL context provide support to their children for the preparation of a high-stakes test, it would have been definitely helpful to know about the pedagogical practices and how schools collaborate with parents, particularly about their policy to inform parents about assessment process (Dawadi, 2019b). Had the data from schools been obtained, it might have helped to clarify several ambiguities emerging from this data that would lead to a more comprehensive picture of the SEE test impact. Thus, this highlights that methodological triangulation in test impact research like this is crucial. Thus, it is

hoped that future research includes methodological triangulation to create a more comprehensive picture of the test impact.

More evidence is required on how parents from different geographical locations or from different professions (such as doctors, engineers, lawyers, etc.) and classes are affected by the high-stakes nature of the test. Thus, it is recommended that future research includes more parents from different social strata. Additionally, this study was limited to the parents, who sent their children to public schools which use Nepali as a medium of instruction. It can be assumed that the parents, whose children study in English medium schools, might be less affected by the test as their children might have better proficiency in English and more confidence in doing well on the test. Thus, more research is needed to explore the views of the parents who send their children to private schools (i.e. English medium schools).

## Conclusion

This study explored the nature of the impacts of the SEE English test on parents through the lens of CLT. The findings indicated that there are social, economic, and psychological impacts of the test on parents but many of them had little knowledge about the test. The impact of the test seems to be associated with the Nepalese cultural practices, such as students' performances on a test is considered to be associated with their social prestige and test scores are considered to be more important than students' skills. Consequently, parents suffer a high level of pressure and anxiety, and they have an economic burden to send their children to private tuition classes and provide resources or materials needed for the test preparation. Therefore, there is an urgent need for stress management training for parents. Schools also need to introduce a formal policy to inform parents about assessment policies and practices as many of them had little knowledge of the test. It is equally important that NEB involves more parents in the test development process and listens to their voices.

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**Saraswati Dawadi** is currently a research associate at the Institute of Educational Technology, The Open University, UK. Her current research is around language assessment, students' equitable access to education and technology, girls' empowerment, and professional development through online learning. She brings a significant experience of teaching and research, and engagement with external/internal stakeholders to ensure educational programmes are tailored to local needs and context.