

# **The State Exam's Washback On English Language Teaching And Learning In The D.R.C. : Case Of Goma Secondary Schools**

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## **RESUME**

*A la fin de leurs études secondaires, la plupart d'élèves sont incapables de s'exprimer en Anglais alors que l'étude de cette langue fait partie du programme d'apprentissage tout au long du cycle d'enseignement secondaire.*

*La plupart des recherches menées jusqu'à ce jour au sujet de cet échec de l'enseignement de la langue Anglaise ont identifié certains facteurs pouvant être à la base de cette situation, notamment le manque de motivation et d'intérêt pour la langue Anglaise chez les élèves, l'usage des méthodes d'enseignement inappropriés, le faible bagage des apprenants en vocabulaire.*

*La présente étude montre que les facteurs jusque-là identifiés par les chercheurs ne sont que des symptômes d'une situation dont la cause réelle est l'effet de lavage de l'examen d'état d'Anglais.*

**Mots clés :** *effet de lavage, examen d'état, enseignement et apprentissage, langue anglaise*

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## **I. Introduction**

English language teaching in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has both long- and short-term objectives. Its long-term objective is to develop the learners' communicative competence in English so as to help remove, or at least, to push back the linguistic barriers that could hinder cooperation with English-speaking countries. (Ministry of Education, 2007)

In order to achieve this long-term objective, English language teaching should succeed in developing the learners' listening, speaking, reading and writing skills. The development of these skills is the short-term objective set by the Congolese Ministry of Education (2007) for English language teaching in secondary schools.

However, these objectives are hardly ever achieved. Most of the learners finish their secondary school studies without being able to listen to and understand oral English speeches, to speak, to read and write English communicatively. Those who really need to develop communicative competence in English often feel compelled to attend English training centers after their normal secondary school studies. English language teaching in secondary schools, therefore, seems to be a waste of time both for teachers and students and of financial resources for the government.

Research carried out so far about this situation usually puts down the failure of ELT to a number of factors among which lack of motivation on the part of students (Habasikiyake 2015; Muhyana Baha 1992), emphasis on reading to the detriment of oral communication (Yaba 1980), little practice of English in the classroom (Muhyana Baha 1992; Habasikiyake 2015), poor teaching methodology (Muhyana Baha 1992; Habasikiyake 2015), use of inappropriate teaching material and insufficient vocabulary stock (Bienfait Mihigo 2020) and it is surprising that the State Examination which is the true driving force of ELT education in secondary schools is scarcely and only casually mentioned among the failure factors. The way the situation has been addressed so far can be analogically compared to fighting an illness symptoms while leaving the illness germ safe in the medical field; and of course, such a treatment approach would be doomed to failure.

The issue of the State Examination washback is important since it can bring more light into the present failure of ELT. If Madaus' (1988:83) claim that testing is "increasingly determining what is taught, how it is taught, what is learned and how it is learned" is true, then factors like poor teaching methods, little practice of the language in the classroom, lack of motivation on the part of the learners, choice of inefficient teaching material, poor vocabulary stock should be reasonably be seen as possibly consequent to the impact of the State Examination

which is the true source of the problem. Like in the medical field, unless the actual source of the ELT failure is addressed, any effort put forth to fight it may reveal vain.

The present study intends to investigate the State Examination's washback on the English language teaching-learning process with a view to identifying relevant underlying factors and proposing remedial provisions. The article revolves around four points, namely review of literature about washback, working methodology, results, and recommendations.

## **II. Review of literature about washback of language tests**

Scholars are not unanimous on the definition of washback. As Bailey (1999:2) asserts, "definitions of washback are as numerous as the people who write about it. These definitions range from simple and straight-forward to very complex." While some scholars seem to limit washback to the effect of tests on teaching (Keith Johnson 2008: 31), or on learning (Shohamy et al 1996: 298), other scholars' definitions cover both teaching and learning. Arthur Hughes (2003: 1), for instance, holds that "the effect of testing on teaching and learning is known as 'backwash.'" Jim Kinley and Gene Thompson (2018: 1) provide even further explanation and say:

*Washback effect refers to the influence that language testing has on curriculum design, teaching practices and learning behaviours. This influence operates in ways that impact the choices of learners and teachers; for example, teachers may teach to a test or learners might focus on aspects of language learning that are likely to be assessed in their future studies.*

Due to the above-mentioned different views of washback, several terms have been used to refer to the connections between testing and learning. Cheng (2005: 24) mentions some of them and their users as follows:

*Washback (Alderson and Wall 1993) together with other similar terms such as 'backwash' (Biggs 1995, 1996; Hughes 2001), test impact (Bachman and Palmer 1996, Baker 1991), systemic validity (Fredericksen and Collins 1989), consequential validity (Messick 1989, 1996), measurement-driven instruction (Popham 1993, 1987), curriculum alignment (Shepherd 1990, 1992, 1993) all refer to different facets of the same phenomenon.*

An explanation of some of these terms is provided by Shohamy (1994: 4) as follows:

- (1) *Washback refers to the impact that tests have on teaching and learning.*
- (2) *Measurement-driven instruction refers to the notion that tests should drive learning.*
- (3) *Curriculum alignment focuses on the connection between testing and the teaching syllabus.*
- (4) *Systemic validity implies the integration of tests into the educational system and the need to demonstrate that the introduction of a new test can improve learning.*

Concerning the origin of the washback concept, Glenn Fulcher (2010: 277) explains: "The present concern with washback began with Messick's (1989: 20) introduction of the notion of consequences into his definition of validity. His concept of validity incorporated both the values that the test endorsed and the impact that the use of the test had on individuals and on institutions."

Glenn Fulcher, however, acknowledges that although the word 'washback' is recent, the notion which it vehicles is not new. As he explains, the motivational role of tests was acknowledged many years ago. He refers to Lathans' (1877: 146) recognition that examinations were "a means of calling out the interest of a pupil and directing it into the desired channels" to show that the motivational role of tests was acknowledged many years ago.

With regard to the cause of washback, scholars' views converge. They see it as "the result of the strong authority of external testing and the major impact it has on the lives of test-takers (Shohamy 1992: 513). About this, Jeremy Harmer (2010) clearly asserts:

The washback effect occurs when teachers see the form of the test their students are going to have to take and then, as a result, start teaching for the test. For example, they concentrate on teaching the techniques for answering certain types of questions rather than thinking in terms of what language learners need to learn in general. This is completely understandable since teachers want as many of their students as possible to pass the test.

As he says in an earlier work (2005: 331), "when students are preparing for a public exam or a school test, it is the teacher's responsibility not only to help them get their English to the level required, but also to familiarize them with the kinds of exam items they are likely to encounter, and give them training in how to succeed." The reason for this 'special responsibility', Sally Burgess and Kathie Head (2005: 1) explain, is the fact that "exam results can have a significant effect on people's lives and careers; exams provide access to higher levels of education and open doors to certain professions."

What Sally Burgess and Kathie Head (2005) say does apply to the Congolese State Examination. Teachers consider students' preparation for it as their responsibility because students' performance on it can have heavy consequences on both teachers and students. Students who fail the State Exam are denied access to higher studies the following year. As far as teachers are concerned, they may be judged incompetent if their students massively fail the State Exam and may even be dismissed from their jobs, especially in private schools, in case of

recurrence of the failure. The intensity of washback varies with the test's stakes; the higher the stakes, the higher the intensity of washback. (Glenn Fulcher 2010, Hughes 2003).

Concerning the direction of washback, it can be either positive or negative. It is positive when the test content and form are consistent with the course objectives so that preparing for the test means pursuing the objectives, and negative if the test content and form diverge from the course goals. Jim Mc Kinley and Gene Thompson (2018) acknowledge this saying:

*Washback can be positive or negative to the extent that it either supports or obstructs the accomplishment of educational goals. If a test has a positive washback, teaching the curriculum becomes the same as teaching to the test. Negative washback occurs when there is a mismatch between the stated goals of instruction and the focus of assessment; it may lead to the abandonment of instructional goals in favour of test preparation.*

This understanding has led to the claim that positive changes in tests can result in improving teaching and learning. It is assumed that high-stakes tests like the Congolese State Examination can exert a desirable influence on the teaching-learning process and so educational processes can be improved through reforms of examinations. (Chapman et al 2000, Mc Namara 2001, Shohamy 2001).

In addition to positive and negative washback, Dina Tsagari (2007: 4) speaks of neutral washback. As she explains, "washback is seen as being positive (beneficial), negative (harmful) or neutral." It is neutral when a test is found not to exert any influence on the teaching-learning process.

In what is referred to as the washback hypothesis, Alderson and Wall (1993) speculated that a test would influence the rate, sequence, degree and depth of teaching and learning and the teacher's choice of teaching content and methods. They formulated 15 hypotheses which were revisited and refined by Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) as follows:

Tests will have different amounts of washback on some teachers and learners than on other teachers and learners. The amount and type of washback will vary according to

- (1) The status of the test (the level of the stakes);
- (2) The extent to which the test is counter to current practice;
- (3) The extent to which teachers and textbook writers think about appropriate methods for test preparation..., and
- (4) The extent to which teachers and textbook writers are willing and able to innovate.

These hypotheses have oriented most of the research on washback and constitute a basic reference for the present investigation.

### **III. Research setting and methodology**

#### **Setting**

Goma town, the research field of this study, is the chief-town of North-Kivu province in the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. It mirrors the Congolese educational system which is made up of three levels, namely the primary, the secondary and the tertiary levels.

Primary education includes grades 1-6 and is provided to children from six to twelve years; but some children attend optional pre-school formal education in kindergarten schools, all of which are either private or denominational.

Secondary education also lasts six years: two years of core secondary school education where the English course is taught for three hours a week and four years of humanities where it is taught for 5 hours a week in general academic streams and one to three hours a week in technical academic streams.

The tertiary level includes universities and colleges. It is divided into three cycles: the Bachelor, the Master and the doctorate degrees which last respectively three, two and three years. In many university faculties, English learning is part of the study program in each of the three cycles.

At the end of the six-year cycle of primary school, students sit for an external national test called ENAFEP. The test is composed of multiple-choice items and productive items requiring objective closed responses. It does not have any English component since English is not part of the official program of primary school although its teaching is gaining terrain in private primary schools. (Tembue 2006)

At the end of the two years of core secondary education – grades 7 and 8 – students take another externally-mandated test called TENASOSP which is mainly composed of multiple-choice items. Unlike ENAFEP, the TENASOSP does include an English component which has so far consisted of a brief text followed by three multiple-choice reading comprehension questions in 2021 and two in 2022.

The State Exam, our concern in this study, intervenes at the end of the humanities. Its English component usually consists of a text followed by multiple-choice questions related to the text comprehension, vocabulary, grammar and sometimes phonology. This exam is, therefore, not the students' first experience with external exams or with multiple-choice questions.

The weighting of the English component in the overall percentage of the State Exam depends on the students' academic streams. It is allocated 9% of the overall State Exam score in general academic streams and 2 to 5% in technical academic streams.

### **Work methodology**

As Diane Wall (2005) explains, the washback phenomenon is so complex that using a single method to investigate it would yield only limited and even misleading results. We, therefore, resorted to triangulation to gather data for this study. Questionnaires were administered to 1690 secondary school students selected from 30 of the 264 schools in Goma town, 250 university bachelor 1 students from five different universities and colleges in the town, 70 teachers and 5 inspectors of English in order to have an idea about their perceptions concerning the State Exam. Using documentary techniques, we gathered 180 items that had been submitted to candidates from different academic streams as State Exams for the English subject in the last fifteen years, i.e. from 2008 to 2022. Interview and lesson observation were also used to get data about teachers' classroom behaviours and activities.

Interviews with teachers and students were semi-structured, i.e. they were made of a number of pre-designed questions, but during the conversations, secondary questions could be asked as they arose. They had three main purposes, namely to clarify some responses to questionnaire items, to test or develop hypotheses and to gather data about teachers' and students' perceptions.

For students, the interviews were organized in groups, one class at a time, very often as soon as the questionnaire sheets had been collected; but for teachers they were in groups for schools with two or more teachers of English and individual for schools with only one teacher of English. Resort to group interviews where possible allowed us to gain time.

Interviews, both with teachers and students, took place in a warm and friendly atmosphere and since they were semi-structured, even the interviewees were offered the opportunity to ask questions of clarification whenever necessary. All the teachers who responded to the survey questionnaire and all the classes where the questionnaire was submitted participated in the interviews.

. Class observation provided the opportunity to gather first-hand live data in situ. The observations were unstructured, direct, overt and non-participant; the type-recorder was used to record verbal components of the lessons in order to palliate the omissions in the observer's handwritten transcripts. In the exploitation of data gathered through observation, focus was on the amount of teacher talking time, that of pupil-talking time, the amount of time allocated respectively to communicative activities and to pre-communicative practice of the linguistic notions taught to students.

Data reduction and analysis were carried out respectively using SPSS and statistical tables and charts.

## **IV. Results**

Data gathered through the above-mentioned techniques were analyzed to find out about the presence of the State Exam's washback, the teaching and the learning aspects that it affects and the differential factors in its operation.

### **Presence of washback**

According to Khaniya (1990b:22), "washback is an inherent attribute of examinations." As he explains, "asking students to take an examination entails teaching and preparing for it. ... Whatever is done all along the way of examination preparation is the washback of the examination." The presence of the State Exam's washback can be established on the basis of Khaniya's assertion. Sixty-four out of 70 teachers, i.e. 91.4% confirmed that they prepare their students for the State Exam. The remaining six teachers who claimed that they do not prepare students for the State Exam, implicitly admitted that they would do so if they were teaching in terminal classes. Among the strategies that they use to prepare their students for the State Exam, teachers mentioned the following ones:

**Table 1: Strategies used by teachers to prepare students for the State Exam**

Strategies used by teachers to prepare students for the State Exam	Frequency out of 70	%
Taking into account previous years' State Exam items in the design of the teaching syllabus	48	68.6
Using previous years' State Exam items in school exams and quizzes	41	58.6
Emphasizing the points which usually occur as State Exam items when teaching	51	72.9
Training students to solve State Exam items	45	64.3
Teaching all the programme material	54	77.1
Teaching all the texts in the textbook	32	45.7

Source: Fieldwork data, 2021-2022

As it can be seen in the table, many teachers heavily lean on previous years' State Exam items in the selection of the points to teach and to emphasize in order to prepare their students for the National Exam. During the interview, they affirmed that they even keep a collection of State Exam items at their disposal to orient their teaching and adjust it to the State Exam requirements.

Not only teachers lean on the State Exam items, students also do. Out of 1690 secondary school students, 743, i.e. 36.9% had started preparing for the State Exam when the questionnaire was administered. One of the main strategies that they used in the preparation consisted in solving previous years' State Exam items either individually or in groups. This was confirmed even by University Bachelor 1 students who had just undergone the State Exam experience; 49.6% of them said they had used that strategy.

As acknowledged by testing experts like Shohamy (1996), Hughes (2003), Fulcher (2010) and Khaniya (2007), washback can be either positive or negative depending on whether or not the test targets the same language skills as the course programme. With regard to this view, the State Exam's washback is rather negative. Most of our teacher respondents explicitly asserted that, in its current format, the State Exam deviates teachers and students from the course objective, i.e. the development of students' communicative competence.

### **The State Exam's washback effect on teachers**

At the teacher's level, the State Exam affects the teaching content, the teaching methodology, the teacher's assessment practices and the teachers' feelings.

### **Teaching content**

One of the teaching aspects that most undergoes the washback of public examinations is the teaching content (Uzma Adam 2014, Cheng 1997). To have an idea of the language areas covered by the State Exam, a sample of 180 State Exam items administered to secondary school leavers for the last 15 years, i.e. from 2008 to 2022 was gathered. Using Harris' (1969) checklist, the 180 items were distributed as follows to the different language skills and components:

**Table 2: Distribution of State Exam items to different language skills and components**

Language components	LANGUAGE SKILLS				Total	%
	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing		
Phonology and orthography	-	3	-	-	3	1.7
Structure	-	5	36	1	42	23.3
Vocabulary	-	-	40	6	46	25.6
General fluency	1	3	84	1	89	49.4
TOTAL	1	11	160	8	180	-
%	0.6	6.1	88.9	4.4	-	100

Source: Fieldwork data (2022)

88.9% of the items are related to the reading skill, 6.1% to speaking, 4.4% to writing and 0.6% to listening. So with regard to the language skills, reading is favoured to the detriment of the other skills. Furthermore, it is to be noted that the few items which deal with speaking, listening and writing test these skills indirectly. The test-takers do not actually listen, speak or write, which heavily impedes the items' validity.

With regard to the language components, 23.3% of the items test grammar; 25.6% assess vocabulary knowledge and 49.4% evaluate reading comprehension fluency. These distribution proportions are replicated in the teaching content. 89.9% of the 1690 students who responded to our questionnaire asserted that their teachers focus their teaching material on reading, vocabulary and grammar, the very language areas tested by the State Exam. Ninety-five point 6 per cent of the teachers also confirmed it. The language skills and components which receive little attention in the State Exam are also neglected in teaching. That the teaching content is affected by the State Exam is also attested by the teachers themselves; 68.6% of them acknowledged that in the design of their teaching syllabus, they take into account the previous years' State Exam items. Asked why they focus their teaching on reading, vocabulary and grammar, 97.1% of the 70 teacher respondents argued that these are the essential elements of the language and are the central focus of the State Exam. It is interesting to note that Habasikiyake (2015) also identified the State Exam's influence as the main explanation for teachers' tendency to limit their teaching to reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary. He notes:

*Despite the teachers' various views on the issue, the truth is that 100% of the respondents admit that they –the taught and tested skills and components- are the most relevant for the English state exam and this*

general view confirms the fact that the other components are neglected because they are not part of the English state exam.

**Teaching methodology**

Fifty-six of the seventy teacher respondents, i.e. eighty per cent, admitted that the State Exam affects their teaching and fifty-eight i.e. 82.9% asserted that if the State Exam were oral, they would give more attention to the communicative aspect of the language and insist more on speaking. This is an implicit indication that the current format of the State Exam is accountable for teachers' negligence of the communicative aspect of the target language. Like the State Exam, classroom practice of vocabulary and grammar is limited to controlled exercises and to the sentence level. The aim is to develop the students' ability to recognize correct use of language items so as to enable them to succeed in school quizzes and exams and, later on, in the State Exam.

The teaching pace is also affected. 77.1% of the teachers manage to cover the whole program or the whole textbook material in order to get their students ready for the State Exam. This results in running after the time and privileging program coverage to the expense of communicative competence.

Another feature of the State Exam that is replicated in teaching, is insistence on knowledge about the language rather than knowledge of the language. The State Exam's items related to writing often test language knowledge rather than language use. Instead of being actually involved in writing letters, students are often asked to identify parts or types of letters. This tendency is echoed in teaching. When dealing with business correspondence, teachers insist on theoretical knowledge of the types and the parts of letters rather than on their actual writing. The objective is to make sure that students understand the technical terms – types of letters, names and places of the different parts of a letter, parts of a composition, and constituents of a paragraph – in order to be able to respond to the State Exam items.

**Teachers' assessment practices**

Data gathered about this issue through questionnaires, interviews and documentary techniques, reveal that school evaluation is, in many respects, influenced by the State Examination. Both the State Exam and school evaluation tasks focus on reading, vocabulary and grammar. The following comparative table gives a clearer idea of the situation:

**Table 1: Comparative table of the language skills and components tested in the State Exam and the school exams.**

Language skill/component	Proportion of items dealing with the skill/component in terms of percentage	
	State Examination	School examinations
Listening	0.6	0
Speaking	6.1	0.24
Reading	88.9	60.8
Writing	4.4	0.16
Phonology & orthography	1.7	8
Grammar	23.3	32.96
Vocabulary	25.6	27.4

Source: Fieldwork data 2021-2022

Only 0.6% of the State Exam items test listening, and this only through indirect test items the validity of which is questionable. In school exams, listening is not even alluded to.

Speaking is tested (indirectly) in 6.1% of the State Exam items and 0.24% of school exams items.

As far as the writing skill is concerned, only 0.16% of the school exams items genuinely test it and it is tested indirectly only by 4.4% of the State Exam items.

Since one aspect of the role of testing is to help students get aware of the objectives and the areas of emphasis of the course, (Madsen 1983: 3) the message conveyed through the State and the school exams is that listening, speaking and writing are not among the major objectives of the English course!

A further problem is that both the State Exam and school evaluation items address the lower learning levels of Bloom's taxonomy as shown in the following table:

**Table 4 : Comparative chart of State and School exams in Bloom's taxonomy as revised by Krathwohl and Anderson in 2001**

Learning level	Frequency of items in terms of percentage	
	In the State Exam	In school exams
Remember	32.2	46.48
Understand	51.7	44
Apply	15	9.12
Analyze	1.1	0.4

Evaluate	-	-
Create	-	-

Source: Fieldwork data 2019 – 2022

Most of the items, both in the State and the school exams address the lower levels of Bloom’s taxonomy, namely remembering, understanding and applying. Only 1.1% of the State Exam items and 0.4% of the school exams items address the students’ analysis capability. The students’ ability to evaluate and to create is not solicited. This is a serious drawback; students who have not been trained to exploit their analysis, synthesis and evaluation capabilities can hardly ever be expected to exploit their creativity in order to make innovations and to make sound judgements in real life situations.

**Teachers’ feelings and attitudes**

Nearly all the teachers (66 out of 70 i.e. 94.3%) acknowledge the usefulness of the State Exam. According to them this test guarantees the pedagogical unity of the country and so it shouldn’t be abolished. The few teachers who wish the State Exam was abolished base their judgement on the validity of its English component rather than on the exam’s overall importance. In their opinion, the students’ performance on the English component of the State Exam does not give an accurate idea of their proficiency in the language.

This feeling that the English component of the State Exam is not valid is shared even by many of those who object to its abolition. Fifty-four teachers, i.e. 77.1% are not satisfied with its current format. Their feeling is that it does not meet any of the aspects of the validity criterion. It lacks construct validity because it is not an accurate “reflection of what it means to know the language” (Celce- Murcia 2001: 526); it is deprived of consequential or systemic validity (Messick 1989: 20) since it deviates teachers and students from the goal of ELT in secondary schools; it has no convergent validity as it does not include different items measuring the same objectives in different ways; it lacks content validity because its content does not constitute a representative sample of the language skills and grammar points which it is expected to assess (Hughes 2003: 26; Keith Johnson 2008: 311). The reduced number of items that the English State Exam is composed of, especially for technical academic streams, also deprives it of its face validity. As Jeremy Harmer (2005: 322) clearly asserts, “a test consisting of only three multiple-choice items” cannot “convince students of its face validity, however reliable or practical teachers think it to be.”

Teachers put down the English State Exam’s lack of validity to its current format, i.e. the fact that it is totally composed of multiple-choice items. Therefore, instead of pleading for its abolition, they recommend that its format be improved.

Other feelings experienced by teachers with regard to the State Examination are pressure and anxiety. Terminal classes’ teachers are pressured by their students whose main concern, at this stage, is to succeed in the State Examination. They report that their students tend to stop coming to school or attending the courses towards the end of the school year if they notice that their teachers are not preparing them for the State Exam as expected. To motivate students to continue to attend the courses, teachers, therefore, feel obliged to devote class time solely to the preparation of the State Exam towards the end of the school year.

Pressure comes not only from students, but also from school headmasters. They need their sixth form students to succeed in the State Exam to maintain their schools reputation. Parents tend to withdraw their children from the schools where students have massively failed the State Exam. And such a situation would be prejudicial to any school because secondary schools, public schools included, heavily depend financially on the tuition paid by parents. In view of what precedes, terminal classes’ teachers feel very anxious for their students’ success in the State Exam. Terminal classes’ teachers’ anxiety is even more accentuated in private schools because they are aware that they risk being dismissed from their job if students fail the State Exam.

A small number of terminal classes’ teachers also reported a feeling of frustration due to the fact that they are not associated in the design and the composition of the State Exam items. As they explained, teachers of English in terminal classes are instructed by the inspection service to submit their proposal of State Exam items; but after doing so for a long time, they have been discouraged because their proposals were hardly ever taken into consideration.

**The State Exam’s washback on students**

Tests exert influence not only on teachers, but also on learners. What justifies this, Chapelle and Douglas (2006, p.16) explain, is the students’ feeling that “tests contain what they must learn, a reasonable view, given that the tests in many cases represent the language hurdle students must clear before continuing their academic careers.”

Among the learning aspects that the State Exam affects, mention can be made of the learning focus, the learning strategies and the learners’ feelings.

### Learning focus

The students' learning focus was identified as follows from their responses to the questionnaire:

**Table 5: Students' learning focus**

Learning focus	Frequency	%
Oral expression and pronunciation	958	56.7
Grammar, vocabulary and reading	583	34.5
Spelling and writing	149	8.8
Total	1690	100

Source: fieldwork data 2019-2022

The overall percentage of students who focus their learning on oral expression and pronunciation is higher than that of those who focus it on vocabulary, grammar and texts. However, a look at the evolution of the students' focus on these language aspects throughout the humanities cycle as displayed in the following table is quite revealing:

**Table 6: Evolution of the students' focus throughout the humanities cycle**

Grades	1	2	3	4
Focus on vocabulary, grammar and texts	25.4%	31.8%	37.8%	42.7%
Focus on oral expression and pronunciation	65.1%	60.9%	53.2%	47.7%

Source: Fieldwork data 2019-2022

The frequency of students who focus their learning on vocabulary, grammar and texts is 104 out of 410 students i.e. 25.4% in grade 1; 140 out of 440 students, i.e. 31.8% in grade 2; 151 out of 400 students, i.e. 37.8% in grade 3 and 188 out of 440 students, i.e. 42.7% in grade 4. The trend is progressive. An opposite trend, i.e. a regressive one is observed with regard to the learning focus on oral expression and pronunciation: 267 out of 410 students, i.e. 65.1% in grade 1; 268 out of 440 students, i.e. 60.9% in grade 2; 213 out of 400 students, i.e. 53.2% in grade 3 and 210 out of 440 students, i.e. 47.7% in grade 4.

So, in lower classes of the humanities, there a tendency for the students to focus their learning on oral expression and pronunciation while in upper classes, the focus is mainly on vocabulary, grammar and texts. The conclusion from this is that the more the students advance towards the end of the humanities, the more they tend to adjust their learning focus to the State Exam's content and requirements.

### Learning strategies

Data gathered through students' questionnaire about this issue indicate that the students' learning strategies vary as follows along the humanities cycle:

**Table 7: Evolution in the students' learning strategies along the humanities cycle**

N°	Strategies used	Percentage of students who use the strategies			
		Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3	Grade 4
01	Reading and understanding course notes in French	65.7%	57.6%	32.6%	31.4%
02	Solving previous years State Exams' items	0%	4.4%	53.3%	56.1%
03	Reading and understanding course notes in English	24.2%	29.8%	13%	11.8%
04	Expressing oneself in English	10.1%	8.2%	0.5%	0.7%
05	Understanding teacher's explanation during course	0%	0%	1%	0%

Source: Fieldwork data, 2021-2022

The global percentage of students who read and try to understand in French their English course notes is 41.7%. But this percentage goes on decreasing in favour of solving previous years' State Exam items so that this latter strategy becomes the most used one in grade 4.

The other strategies used by students are reading and understanding the course notes in English and self-expression in English. The percentage of students who use these two strategies also goes on decreasing in favour of the exploitation of previous years' State Exam items as the students advance towards the State Exam.

University B1 students' responses concerning the strategies used by grade 4 pupils to prepare for the State Exam tend to concur with the ones provided by secondary school pupils. They pointed out exploitation of previous years' State Exams' items –individually or in groups – as the most used by grade 4 pupils, followed by the use of their respective teachers' notes.



### **The State Exam's washback on students' motivation and attitudes**

Motivation is a "kind of internal drive which pushes someone to do things in order to achieve something." (Jeremy Harmer 2005: 51) Whether it is intrinsic or extrinsic, integrative or instrumental, motivation is very important in language learning. Without it, learning may fail to occur.

Lam (1994: 84-85) shows that tests affect learners' motivation. He uses the term "attitude washback" to refer to the effect of tests on the learners' attitude towards language and language teaching. Data collected from teachers of English and students seem to indicate that the English learning process in Goma secondary schools does undergo "attitude washback" from the State Exam. Teachers of English in technical academic streams, for instance, report that the fact that the English component of the State Exam only consists of 2 or three items and is allocated only 2 to 3% of the State Exam marks is a demotivating factor. It induces students, especially those from upper level classes, to neglect the English course.

During the group interview that they were submitted to after returning their questionnaire sheets, students from technical academic streams confirmed their teachers' report. They argued that they do not see why and how they can prepare for the English part of the State Exam because it consists of 2 or three items only. As they explained, this makes it difficult, if not impossible, to know which parts of the course will be tested. Moreover, they added, the English part of the State Exam can hardly affect their overall result on the State Exam. They prefer to devote sufficient time and efforts to the preparation of their academic stream subjects instead of "wasting time" on reading the English course notes.

University B1 students who had already undergone the State Exam experience also expressed similar points of view. Thirty-seven per cent of them asserted that many secondary school students do not prepare for the English part of the State Exam seriously because of its low weight in the students' overall percentage. A further 11% of these respondents affirmed that many students do not find it necessary to read their English course notes in preparation for the State Exam because it is possible either to succeed in English without any preparation or to fail it despite one's preparation for it.

As far as the general academic streams are concerned, the learners' disinterest in the English course is also acknowledged by teachers and inspectors of English. All the five inspectors and the majority of teachers who responded to the survey questionnaires held that Goma secondary school students do not like the English course.

Teachers of English put down their students' disinterest in the course to the following factors:

- Students' unawareness of the importance of English (67.1% of the teachers)
- Pupils' thought that English is difficult (65.7% of the teachers)
- Low weight of English in the State Exam (42.8%)
- Students' dislike for the English language (41.4%)
- Poor teaching of English in secondary schools (28.6%)

As far as the inspectors of English are concerned, they point out the following factors as the causes of students' disinterest in the English course:

- Students do not see the importance of English in their French environment (all the five inspectors)
- They do not find the English course interesting (3 out of 5 inspectors)
- They are not motivated by their teachers. (2 out of 5 inspectors)
- They do not like English (3 out of 5 inspectors)
- They are not sufficiently exposed to the English language (1 out of 5 inspectors)

Both the teachers and the inspectors of English mention students' unawareness of the importance of English and their dislike for the English language among the main causes of their disinterest in the course. In terms of percentage of those who mention it, the students' unawareness of the importance of English comes in first position in the list.

However, this view of the situation seems to be denied by the students. Students' responses to item 1 of the questionnaire reveal that 99.4% of the pupils wish they could be able to communicate in English and many of them are determined to undertake its learning in English training centers in the future in order to develop communicative competence in it. To justify their wish, students from both technical and general academic streams provided reasons related to instrumental and integrative motivation among which the following ones:

- English is today the most important language and its mastery is an asset and a door to job opportunities.
- It could allow me to collaborate with English-speaking people
- I like the English language and I feel frustrated when I hear people speak it and I can't interact with them.
- English is used in all the important international forums.
- Etc.

Students' wish to develop communicative competence in English, their determination to undertake the learning of this language in English training centers in the future and the justifications provided for these constitute a strong evidence that they are perfectly aware of the importance of English and they love it. The

problem is the way it is taught. Students aspire to develop communicative competence in English, but they feel that the English course, as taught by their teachers, will not allow them to achieve that aspiration. More than 73% and 80% of the students respectively in general and technical academic streams do not hope they will be able to communicate in English thanks to the English course. The overall percentage of students who share this feeling amounts to 76.45%.

The proportion of students who still hope the English course can help them develop communicative competence goes on decreasing as students advance towards the end of the humanities cycle. From 42.44% in grade 1, it drops to 27.27% in grade 2, to 16.35% in grade 3 and finally to 8.86 in grade 4. As the students complain, instead of being taught as a tool of communication, English is taught to them as a school subject like geography and history just to enable them to succeed in exams. Its teaching focuses on reading, grammar and vocabulary rather than on communication.

So the immediate cause of students' disinterest in the English course is poor teaching. All the other factors evoked by teachers and inspectors are related to it. The way English is taught gives the students the impression that it is too difficult to learn for communication. Since the course does not meet the learners' aspirations, they do not find it interesting and they are not motivated to attend it. However, poor teaching itself, is induced by the State Exam which gears the teaching process. Teachers tend to focus their action on the language aspects assessed by the State Exam, namely reading, vocabulary and grammar. They overlook the communicative aspect of the language because it is not assessed by the State Exam. When students realize that the English course cannot help them achieve their aspiration, they are disappointed and their motivation to attend the course wanes.

### **Factors of differential washback**

Three main factors of differential washback have been identified in this study: the class level, the teacher's experience and the academic stream.

#### **The class level**

The intensity of washback is higher in terminal classes' than in lower-level ones. For instance, 42.7% of terminal classes' students focus their learning on vocabulary, reading and grammar, the language aspects usually tested by the State Exam while only 25.4% of grade one students do so. Moreover, the percentage of students who are more concerned with their success in the State Exam than the development of communicative competence is higher in terminal classes (76.4%) than in non-terminal ones (58.6%). The difference between upper-level classes' students and lower-level ones can be justified by the proximity principle according to which "the nearer a test, the more pressure it exerts on test-takers."

The class level as a factor of differential washback also applies to teachers. Teachers of English in lower-level classes feel less pressured by the State Exam than their colleagues who teach in upper-level classes and the way the two groups of teachers prepare their students for the State Exam is different. While upper-level classes' teachers lean heavily on previous years' State Exam items to prepare their students for the State Exam, lower-level classes' teachers opt for a global preparation and manage to cover the whole program material. The difference in this respect seems to be due to the fact that terminal classes' teachers are officially instructed to initiate their students into the multiple-choice questions format. (Revue de l'Inspecteur N°13 bis, 2016).

Dissatisfaction with the current format of the State Exam is also more salient among upper-level classes' teachers than among lower-level classes' teachers. An explanation to this is the fact that the two groups of teachers base their evaluation of the State Exam on different criteria. Non-terminal classes' teachers consider the State Exam to be well composed because it tests material actually prescribed by the program and taught to students. They are satisfied to see that at this level their students are already able to respond to some State Exam items and they know that this contributes to their reputation as efficient teachers. They are aware that the State Exam does not incite their students to develop communicative competence, but this negative feature of the test is overshadowed by teachers' feeling of achievement and their concern for self-reputation. Terminal classes' teachers, on the other hand, base their judgement on a more objective criterion, the exam's failure to incite students to learn to communicate. They somewhat experience a feeling of guilt; their students are at the end of the cycle and still, they cannot express themselves in English. They blame the State Exam for this failure, thus expressing a feeling of repression.

#### **The teaching experience**

Data gathered for this study reveal that the washback effect of the State Exam acts differently on long-experienced teachers on the one hand and less-experienced teachers on the other hand. The following table relative to the strategies used by teachers to prepare their students for the State Exam gives a clear idea about it:

**Table 8 : Strategies used to prepare students for the State Exam depending on teachers' experience.**

Strategies used by teachers to prepare their Students for the State Exam	Teachers' experience					
	10 or less than 10 years		More than ten years		Total	
	Freq./36	%	Freq./34	%	Freq./70	%
Taking into account State Exam items in the design of the long-range plan	16	44.4	32	94.1	48	68.6
Using previous Years State Exam items in school evaluation tasks	15	41.7	26	76.5	41	58.6
Emphasis on points which often occur as State Exam items while teaching	23	63.9	28	82.4	51	72.9
Training students to solve previous years' State Exam items	16	44.4	29	85.3	45	64.3
Managing to teach all the material prescribed by the program	30	83.3	24	70.6	54	77.1
Managing to teach all the texts in the textbook	19	52.2	13	38.2	32	45.7

Source: Fieldwork data 2019-2022

The intensity of the washback on the teaching content is higher among more experienced teachers than less experienced ones. The percentage of over 10 year-experienced teachers who lean on previous years' State Exam items in their teaching (selection of syllabus items and of points to insist on while teaching, training students to solve State Exam items) is higher than that of under 10-year experienced ones who do so. While under 10-year experienced teachers do their best to cover the program or the textbook material to prepare their students for the State Exam, over 10-year-experienced ones emphasize the points likely to be tested by the State Exam and train them to solve previous years' State Exam items.

An explanation for this difference is that, due to their long experience, more than ten-year experienced teachers rely on their predictions about the State Exam items and so they indulge in routine teaching practices. In grammar and vocabulary teaching, the essential for them is developing students' recognition ability and memorization of usage rules. On the other hand, as less experienced teachers are not self-confident in their predictions, they feel it necessary to cover all the textbook material so as to avoid bad surprises.

The teaching experience as a differential factor also applies to the teacher's feelings about the State Exam. The following table is quite revealing about that situation:

**Table 9: Teachers' satisfaction with the State Exam format taking into account their experience:**

Teachers' responses	Over 10 years' experience		10 or less than 10 years' experience		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Yes	4	11.8	12	33.3	16	22.9
No	30	88.2	24	66.7	54	77.1
Total	34	100	36	100	70	100

Source: Fieldwork data.

Over 10 years of experience, few teachers (4 out of 34 i.e. 11.8%) are satisfied with the way the State Exam is composed while 30, i.e. 88.2% are not. But, at 10 or less than ten years of experience, 33.3% are satisfied while 66.7% are not.

This difference between long-experienced and less experienced teachers also seems to be due to a difference in the evaluation criteria. Most of the less experienced teachers are still very concerned with gaining reputation in the teaching career; they need to confirm themselves in the teaching career and they rely on their students' success in the State Exam to get reputed as good teachers. Whether this exam contributes to the development of communicative competence or not is not their main concern; for them, the State Exam format is good because the students can easily succeed in it.

As far as long-experienced teachers are concerned, their reputation in the teaching career is already well established. Although they may be happy to see their students succeed in the State Exam, they base their evaluation of this exam on a more objective criterion: its alignment with the course objectives.

### The academic stream

Two categories of academic streams are concerned in this study, the general and the technical academic streams. This investigation data indicate that teachers of English in technical academic streams complain more against students' disinterest in the course and in communicative activities than those who teach in general academic streams. The following teachers' responses to item ..... of their questionnaire are quite revealing about the issue:

**Table 10: Students' interest in communicative activities, general academic streams versus technical academic streams**

Students' interest In com.activities	General academic streams		Technical academic streams	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Yes	20	62.5	7	38.9
No	12	37.5	11	61.1
Total	32	100	18	100

Source: data extracted from table 30

Sixty-one point one per cent of teachers of English in technical academic streams feel that their students are not interested in communicative activities while in general academic streams only 37.5% of the teachers feel so. As explained earlier, the problem with technical academic streams is the low number of English class hours per week, and thereby, the low weight of the course both in school evaluation and in the State Exam.

## V. Conclusion and recommendations

The State Exam's washback on the English language teaching-learning process in the DRC is a fact. The English component of this national test exerts a heavy influence on the teaching content and methodology. With regard to the teaching content, teachers and students tend to focus their effort on vocabulary, grammar and reading comprehension, the language areas tested by the State Exam and to neglect the listening, speaking and writing skills together with the development of communicative competence because these are not tested by the State Exam.

The consequence of this is that students finish their secondary school cycle without being able to communicate in English. Habasikiyake (2015:208) acknowledges this situation saying:

*In Goma schools, learners are taught and assessed in reading comprehension, grammar and vocabulary only. Skills such as listening, speaking and writing are completely ignored and unexploited. ...It follows therefore that learners who are not trained in listening, speaking and writing cannot communicate in English because these skills constitute the main frame and foundation on which the other skills hinge.*

Research carried out so far, tends to put down the failure of ELT in the DRC to the students' lack of motivation and interest in English. But the present investigation has revealed that students begin the English language study with a high motivation. They aspire to develop communicative competence in this language. But there is a mismatch between the students' aspiration and the way English is taught in the secondary schools. While students aspire to develop communicative competence in the language, teachers, under the influence of the State Exam's washback effect, focus their action on a theoretical knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. Because of this mismatch, students soon realize that the way the English course is taught will not allow them to achieve their aspiration and most of them switch off. The courageous ones who continue to listen to the teacher and to participate actively in the course do so only for the sake of gaining marks.

The State Exam does not need to be abolished. Limiting the secondary school-leaving examination to school assessment would negatively affect homogeneity of secondary school diplomas, the country's pedagogical and political unity.

What is required, then, is changing the State Exam's washback from negative to positive. And any attempt of such a change should take into consideration the following hints provided by Hughes (2003: 53-57):

(1) 'Test the abilities whose development you want to encourage'. With regard to this suggestion, the new State Exam version should take into account the objectives of ELT, namely, the development of the students' communicative skills. This would mean either replacing or complementing the multiple-choice version by/with an integrative, productive and four-skill based direct one.

(2) 'Sample widely and unpredictably'.

An integrative, productive and four skill-based direct test would easily meet these sampling recommendations. Since the jury's questions would be based on a variety of texts and situations, predictability would not be possible. Moreover, with integrative productive tests, it would be possible to evaluate the candidates' overall proficiency (grammar, pronunciation, use of vocabulary, fluency in the different skills...) in the target language.

(3) 'Use direct testing'

One of the main weaknesses identified in the current State Exam version is the exclusive use of indirect items. Whether they are related to pronunciation, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary, etc., they rely on recognition rather than on production. An integrative, productive, four skill-based direct test would meet Hughes' recommendation.

Keith Morrow (1986: 6) also advocates the use of direct tests. He affirms that direct tests of language performance will be "most beneficial in terms of washback effect and argues that communicative tests should have a "powerful and positive washback effect into the classroom."

(4) 'Make testing criterion-referenced'. Hughes (2003: 55) justifies this recommendation as follows:

*If test specifications make clear just what candidates have to be able to do, and with what degree of success, then students will have a clear picture of what they have to achieve. What is more, they know that if they do perform the tasks at the criteria level, they will be successful on the test, regardless of how other students perform. Both these things will help to motivate students.*

The State Exam meets this recommendation because the number of successful candidates is not limited in advance. What will be necessary is to inform students and teachers about the assessment criteria. The assessment scale on which scoring will be based should be explained to students and teachers in time, i.e. long before the students sit for the test.

(5) 'Base achievement tests on objectives'.

This recommendation is pertinent. The present State Exam system is not based on the ELT objectives and it disorients not only students and teachers, but also textbook writers and syllabus designers from the course objectives. Although it is said to be an achievement test, success or failure on its English component is not a clear indication that the learners have achieved the course objectives or not. Basing the State Exam directly on the course objectives will be beneficial to the whole Congolese educational system:

- It will compel course designers to be explicit about the goals to pursue;
- Performance on the test will show how far students have achieved the course objectives;
- The test will put pressure on the syllabus designers and the officials in charge of the selection of textbooks to ensure that these are consistent with the course objectives.
- It will work against the perpetuation of poor teaching practice, something that the current English State Exam which is course-content-based fails to do.

(6) 'Ensure the test is known and understood by students and teachers'. About this recommendation, Hughes comments:

*However good the potential backwash effect of a test may be, the effect will not be fully realised if students and those responsible for teaching do not know and understand what the test demands of them. The rationale for the test, its specifications, and sample items should be made available to everyone concerned with preparation for the test. This is particularly important when a new test is being introduced, especially if it incorporates novel testing methods. Another, equally important, reason for supplying information of this kind is to increase test reliability.*

What Hughes says here stresses the educational officials' responsibility before the introduction of a new test: teachers and students must be sensitized about the motivation of the change and about the new test content, format and structure. Without this, the change may not achieve the expected positive backwash

(7) 'Where necessary, provide assistance to teachers.'

As far as the English State Exam is concerned, Hughes' recommendation is worth taking into consideration. Changing the current State Exam test model into an integrative productive four skill-based direct test would aim to encourage communicative language teaching. Yet, about half of the teachers in Goma secondary schools are more than ten year-experienced in teaching English. Since the start of their teaching career, their teaching may have been affected by the current State Exam system. They have developed teaching practices, habits and routines appropriate for preparing their students for the current national test model. Some teachers even have more than thirty years of teaching experience and may not have been properly initiated into communicative methodology. A look at the teachers' documents (preparation sheets) has revealed that even younger teachers have adopted the law of the least effort and do not put forth sufficient effort in the accomplishment of their teaching tasks. They may be reluctant to adopt the required change unless they are incited to do so. Introducing a new State Exam version would require training the teachers whatever their teaching experience to help them adjust their teaching to it.

(8) 'Counting the cost'. This recommendation is related to practicality or feasibility. Some of the recommendations above involve substantial expenses in time and in money. Individual testing takes more time than the usual testing procedures; the production and distribution of sample tests, and the training of teachers will surely require money and it is quite easy to argue that the introduction of an integrative, productive, communicative type exam is impractical. Such an argument, Hughes (2003: 56) says "would reveal an incomplete understanding of what is involved. He advises:

*Before we decide that we cannot afford to test in a way that will promote beneficial backwash, we have to ask ourselves a question: what will be the cost of not achieving beneficial backwash? When we compare the cost of the test with the waste of effort and time on the part of teachers and students in activities quite inappropriate to their true learning goals (and in some circumstances with the potential loss to the national*

*economy of not having more people competent in foreign languages), we are likely to decide that we cannot afford not to introduce a test with a powerful beneficial backwash effect.*

Hughes' argument is quite relevant. Refusing to change the State Exam's format would mean not considering the prejudice it causes. If ELT in secondary schools cannot allow students to develop communicative competence in the target language, it will continue to be a waste of time for both teachers and students and a waste of money for the government.

In view of what precedes, we suggest that the current multiple-choice component of the State Exam be complemented with an integrative, productive, four skill-based and direct test.

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