

**EFFECTS OF HIGH STAKES EXAMS AND EXAM
PROSPECTS AMONG BANGLADESHI STUDENTS**

By

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Humanities in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in English

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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my/our own original work while completing degree at Brac University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I/We have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Approval

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Ethics Statement

While conducting the research, I took consent of my participants to use their real life experiences in my thesis. I did not in any means forced them to participate in this interview. Every relevant attempt was made to convey to the participants that none of their personal information details would be made privy to the public. I did member checking with all of the 10 participators before finalizing my work. Therefore, there is no room for my own misinterpretation of the data that has been collected for research purpose. Moreover, I have strictly maintained participant's discretion and kept their real identity confidential. I further used abbreviation instead of their real names depending on the test they took.

Abstract

Bangladeshi students who aim to go abroad for higher education often have to give external standardized exams like IELTS, TOEFL, SAT, GMAT and GRE. Such an exam acts as a marker for students' language proficiency on an international scale, as well as a gatekeeper to foreign universities. However, given Bangladesh's non-implemented communicative framework in language learning, it is seen that the average Bangladeshi student's English proficiency is subpar even after they complete their college education which includes about 12 years of English learning. In this paper, I have therefore focused mainly on Bangladeshi students studying under the national curriculum because they often struggle to get good scores in such tests because of the aforementioned flaws in the education system. Hence, students often have to take preparations for months on end before attending these tests. This qualitative research is done by taking extensive interviews of 10 participants through phone calls. Next, from the recorded interviews thematic analysis was done, which yielded the following themes: background and English language exposure, choice of discipline, preparation and results and challenges faced – all of which correlate to challenges and preparation of external standardized exams. Future research is recommended in this field since there is a scarcity of research on standardized language exams in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Standardized exam, Language proficiency, High stakes test, Language exposure, Exam preparation, Exam score, Coaching, Self-study

Dedication

I would like to dedicate my work to my wonderful and ever-supporting parents.

Acknowledgement

Firstly, all praise to Almighty Allah for giving me the strength to complete my work amidst all the things that have been going around me. Next, I would like to mention my ever-supportive parents for always letting me pursue my heart and for bringing me up as the person that I am today. I would most importantly like to mention the amazing faculty members that I have had the privilege to be doing their classes. Starting with Sabreena Ahmed miss, even though I had the opportunity to do only one class miss, I would always remember how she always goes out of her way to help the students. Another teacher is Mohammad Mahmudul Haque Sir, who has imparted us with his reservoir of knowledge through actual student-centered classes where we have an equal platform to voice our opinions. Last but not the least, to my thesis supervisor Md. Al Amin Sir, I would like to extend my gratitude. I have done most of my undergraduate classes under Sir. I personally had the best and most comfortable classroom experience in Sir's classes. Instead of always relying on books, Sir would also share with us his real-life experiences and would often give real-life examples to make us understand. He would try his best to make the lessons easier and would make the classroom environment very communicative for the students. I would finally like to give a special mention to my friends who have encouraged me and helped me to find participants. Without their support, this paper would not have been completed. I am ever grateful for the continuous support.

Keywords: Standardized exam, language proficiency, language exposure, preparation, score, coaching, self-study

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1. Chapter One: Introduction

The aim of this paper is to find out why High stakes exams are so important in a Bangladeshi students life. Through the extensive interviews taken from the Bangladeshi students it has been possible to shed light on the factors that has played a crucial role in their life. This research aims to be the answer of as to why our student's struggles while preparing for these (IELTS, TOEFL, GMAT, GRE and SAT) high stakes exams. Moreover, the study also has the potential which could aid the authorities and policy makers to come up with a possible solution for our students to ace such exams. Since, the participants of this research are real life Bangladeshi students belonging to different educational background the paper meets the its criteria as a credible and authentic study.

Every year many students from Bangladesh take language tests like IELTS and TOEFL. They sit for these exams to prove their eligibility in terms of using a foreign language. These kinds of language tests are developed to measure the non-native student's proficiency in English. The significance of these tests might not be considered as equal to national board exams but it plays a crucial part in a student's life who wants to pursue their studies abroad. Therefore, these tests can be considered as high-stake tests for those students whose IELTS or TOFEL score is going to determine their future abroad. The best part about these tests is that there is no concept of the pass or fail. Every individual will be given points based on their performance on each activity. This is one of the positive aspects of tests because usually in traditional tests our potentials are determined by pass or fail. This creates a lot of pressure on a student's mind. When someone fails, he/she probably thinks he has no talents. This kind of grading system often demotivates students against studying. But in language and reasoning tests, one will get a band score for each skill depending on the level of their English proficiency.

On the other hand, even though GMAT and GRE are reasoning tests, they are regulated in the English language. The GMAT (Graduate Management Admission Test) is used to measure the student's standard before applying to a business school. The GRE (Graduate Record Examination) is given for admission to various graduate programs. In both GMAT and GRE there is no pass or fail benchmark. Every university sets up a requirement score, and if the student can get that then he/she will be considered eligible to study that program. Similarly, SAT (Scholastic Assessment Test) is an admission test taken by college prospects to measure whether they are capable of being in the undergraduate program. It is especially taken by countries like the US and Canada. Just like GRE and GMAT exams, SAT also does not have a passing or failing grade, though of course certain marks are considered low and certain ones high.

1.1 Context of the Study

When it comes to quality education, Bangladesh fails to provide the students with international level education. None of Bangladesh's universities are among the top 100 in the world university ranking. Most of the universities lack funding and modern equipments; hence our students cannot compete in an international level. Other notable factors like poor governance, corruption, politics and poor infrastructure are also responsible for low quality education in Bangladesh. As a result of all these complications/drawbacks students choose to study abroad for higher education. However, it is not easy to directly enroll in these foreign universities, our students have to give external standardized exams and also have to get a score that meets those universities criteria. Since Bangladeshi universities are not world renowned and English is not our native language hence these universities tells our students to prove their credibility through such external exams (IELTS, TOEFL, GMAT, GRE and SAT). As these exam results holds the key to determining the student's future, these are

considered as high stake test. If any students fails to meet the desired score then he/she will not be accepted to the university. Hence, these tests are taken very seriously and the students try their level best to secure a position in the university they applied.

In Bangladesh, almost all the schools and colleges continue to use the Grammar Translation Method (GTM) for teaching language despite the fact that CLT is the official language teaching method. Especially the national curriculum schools religiously follow GTM while teaching language students in the class. As a result, very little oral work takes place and teachers have to spoon feed the students in the teacher-centered approach. Hence, more focus and priority are given on the mother tongue and the target language (English) is ignored. Since English is used as a second language in our country, and we being the non-native speakers of English, it is difficult for our students to do good in standardized exams like IELTS, TOEFL, GMAT, GRE and SAT. Although English is taught as a compulsory subject in schools and colleges, “performance in English is generally still found to be very poor” (Chowdhury & Kabir, 2014, as cited in Chowdhury & Kamal 2014, p. 5). Hence, in the year 1996 “the government introduced Communicative English Teaching (CLT) in Class 6” and later on it was extended up to class 12 (Mazumder 2013; Podder 2013).

However, this was not enough because GTM is so deeply rooted in the teachers and students’ mind that often CLT became overlooked despite being the official method. Instead of focusing on all four language skills (speaking, reading, writing and listening), more emphasis would be given in reading and writing. As a consequence, lack of speaking activities in the class “results in a meagre development of this skill” (Hosni, 2014, p. 24). Hence, during the IELTS test students are always tense about the speaking exam. As English speaking activities were not incorporated from the childhood in our education system, students grew up not giving much emphasis on this particular skills.

1.2 Focus of the Study

The main focus of my research is to explore how Bangladeshi students prepare themselves for external standardized exams like IELTS, TOEFL, SAT, GMAT, and GRE. This is because external standardized exam refers to only those standardized exams which students give for admission in foreign universities.

I have particularly chosen these exams because of their popular status in Bangladesh among most other standardized exams. Besides, what and how the students are doing to prepare for such tests have not also been researched in depth. The techniques and strategies used for the preparation, as well as the challenges faced while doing so, are the specific research gaps that this study will fill.

1.3 Significance of the Study

Since no research, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, has been done regarding Bangladeshi students' preparation about high stakes exams, this paper will fill this research gap. Although there is a paper that studied the preparation for the IELTS exam, it was done in Hong Kong – Choy and Davenport (1986) – not in Bangladesh. Hence, in Bangladesh no such study has been conducted. Therefore, I hope this research will help the students and other researchers in the same field to explore and further open a new door for them. Moreover, this paper can be used by the policy makers to find better ways to remove or lessen the challenges that are faced by our students.

2. Chapter Two: Literature Review

As already stated in the introduction part, various external standardized exams are taken by Bangladeshi students to prove their academic capabilities in the institutions that they are aiming to study abroad. It is important to know before delving further the current trends in research on the topic. Therefore, I have categorized this literature review into five sections.

2.1 What are Standardized Exams?

A standardized test can be defined in several ways. One definition is similar to that of an achievement test: when all the students give tests in the same manner, answers the same questions within a fixed allocated time along with the same grading criteria. The test is conducted in such a manner “which makes it possible to compare the relative performance of individual students or groups of students” (The Glossary of Education Reform, 2015). Since the answer scripts are graded by a robot or blind reviewer, it guarantees to provide “an accurate, unfiltered measure of what a student knows” (Churchill, 2015). Another, more specific, definition of standardized exams is that such exams are usually large-scale tests taken by a certain mass audience that shares the common goal of going to foreign countries for a job or higher studies

2.2 Why Standardized Exams are Important

Standardized exams are important in a student’s life because their results determine if that student has reached the desired benchmark given by the educational institution. Through standardized tests, teachers can identify a student’s strengths and weaknesses. Hence, it is considered “a good metric to gauge areas for improvement” among students, which are further used to track their progress in academic life (Pros & Cons – PROCON.ORG, 2020).

Without taking standardized exams, the teachers would not be able to find out the effectiveness of their commands and teachings in

2.3 Different Types of High Stakes Tests

High stakes tests have major consequences in a student's life. It decides the student's future in upcoming educational events of their life. In Bangladesh, tests like SSC and HSC and even final year or term exams at school, college, and university are considered as high stakes tests. However, standardized exams like IELTS, TOEFL, GMAT, GRE and SAT are also considered as high stakes test because these exams are taken to get admitted to a foreign university. The stakes of these exams are so high that foreign university admission depends on them. There are various types of high stakes tests worldwide, but in the Bangladeshi context, the most popular ones are IELTS, TOEFL, SAT, GMAT and GRE.

IELTS (International English Language Testing System) has become a household name in Bangladesh. It is very well-known among students who want to go abroad for higher studies. It was developed in the United States in 1963, and since then "its prominence in the field of second language testing" has been unparalleled. (Hale et al., 1984, p. 45). It was built "to help in the assessment of the language competence of the prospective foreign students" (Choy & Davenport, 1986, p. 108). Each of the four skills reading, writing, speaking and listening has 30 marks, and each skill has a band score of 1-9, with 9 being the highest score signaling native-like proficiency. Overall, the total score ranges from 0-120, and the total band score is the average of the four band scores – for example, a person getting a band score of 7 in speaking, 7 in writing, 8 in listening, and 8 in reading will get a total band score of 7.5. IELTS scores have a validity of two years. There is a similar language test like IELTS which tests the English language proficiency. It is widely known as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language or TOEFL). It is also designed to measure the English language

proficiency by measuring all four language skills of non-native English speakers. Abboud and Hussein (2011) state that it tests the student's skills in reading and listening comprehension, along with structure and written expressions (p. 111). In a study conducted by Ling et al. (2014) with 607 American and Chinese participants which found out that students who were under the USA based program improved their speaking and writing skills whereas the Chinese based program students have improved their reading and listening skills as compared to the US based program. TOEFL is accepted in 190 countries around the globe. Just like IELTS, TOEFL is accepted for both undergraduate and postgraduate studies. TOEFL scores also expire after two years.

Scholastic Assessment Test or SAT is another high stake external standardized exam but unlike IELTS and TOEFL it does not solely concentrate on language proficiency; rather it also assesses student's "verbal and mathematical abilities" (Atkinson, 2015). SAT is essentially a standardized exam that is structured to calculate a student's language and mathematical competency through exams that are categorized into sections like Reading, Writing, Analyzing, and Mathematics. SAT is only applicable for students who are about to start their undergraduate degrees. Students looking to get into ivy-league colleges and universities often aim for high SAT scores. GMAT also has a math and writing section like SAT. SAT's math is known to be more about calculation whereas GMAT's math is more about logic. The verbal section of SAT is more focused in vocabulary but GMAT's verbal part concentrates more on analyzing arguments. According to Aggarwal, Goodell, and Goodell (2014), Graduate Management Admission Test or GMAT is "a significant element when assessing admission procedures to either postgraduate studies (p. 125). Due to the growing demand for business degrees "the role of the GMAT as a gatekeeper for business leadership" also continues to rise among business students around the world (p. 126). GMAT is mandatory if someone wants to enroll for a Master's degree abroad. In a research done by

Wilson (1985), it was found that students from European countries and well-established English-speaking Asian countries (India, Malaysia and Philippines) have higher GMAT scores than the students which belong to other Asian countries (Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia, and Korea) and the Middle East. Most of the high-ranked business schools around the world ask for a GMAT score. The higher the score is, the more chances there are for that student to get into a well-ranked university. Besides, it is mentioned on the official website of the Graduate Management Admission Council (GMAC) that 1,900 schools globally consider GMAT scores in their admission processing (p. 127).

GRE or Graduate Record Examination is another external standardized computer-based exam that measures the eligibility criteria of foreign students applying to various graduate or business programs. Many schools ask the students for their GRE scores before enrolling in a Master's program in any Business subject. Mostly GMAT is required to get in to a Business school but these days some universities also accept GRE as well. The GRE test is structured to calculate a student's "verbal, quantitative, and analytical abilities" (Wilson, 1988, p. 3). GRE grew gradually in popularity among students over the years. Besides, many graduate schools require GRE because it becomes easier for them to compare the students based on their objective GRE scores. It can help students to elevate the application process by showcasing their additional skills. Although the GRE scores alone might not help to get into the university, they can compensate for other areas of lacking (Alsup, 2019).

2.4 External Standardized Exam Worldwide

Standardized exams like IELTS, TOEFL, SAT, GMAT, and GRE play an important role globally for higher education. IELTS is the leading test of English for international migrating students for higher studies. Its number of candidates is increasing rapidly all over the world. In 2018 about 3.5 million people took the IELTS test. IELTS is considered very

significant because upwards of 11,000 organizations trust IELTS worldwide. Hence, the IELTS scores are considered by renowned academic institutions around the world. At a university in Hong Kong, a web-based questionnaire was distributed among student applicants for the common English proficiency assessment for collecting data about how students are preparing for IELTS (Zhengdong, 2009).

As for TOEFL, it is also a widely popular test which has been extensively researched. Research into its efficacy has found correlations of high scores to predict high GPA at college (Cho & Bridgeman, 2012). Unfortunately, TOEFL tests are not quite reliable, as Wainer and Lukhlele (1997) found up to 40% unreliability in the speaking section, though there was high reliability in the listening section. That being said, TOEFL scores are popular enough to act as gatekeepers or at least predictors of college admission requirements to see the eventual success that prospective students will have (Harsch et al., 2017).

Countries like the USA, UK, Canada, India, Singapore, Malaysia, Australia, and various other countries accept SAT. As stated by the 2020 SAT Suite of Assessments Program Results, in the high school class of 2020 about 2.2 million students have taken the SAT exam (Newsroom, 2020). In the last five years nearly 1.3 million Graduate Management Admission Test or GMAT have taken place globally (Profile of GMAT™ TESTING: Citizenship, Ty2014-ty2018). Furthermore, in the year 2014 about 243,529 GMAT tests were given by potential Business students from all around the world (Profile of GMAT™ TESTING: Citizenship, Ty2014-ty2018). Every year across 160 countries, over half a million students take the GRE exam administered by Educational Testing Service (ETS). An article by the *Times of India* newspaper mentioned that the number of students taking the GRE test increased by 60%. In 2011-2012, around 30,000 individuals sat for GRE, and within two years, the number raised to 84,841 (*The Times of India*, 2014). Asian countries in particular

place high value to IELTS, and the vast majority of the test-takers are from Asia (Pearson, 2021).

Despite the worldwide popularity for standardized language exams, there are some significant issues that stem out of such exams. For example, Powers (1993) carried out a meta-analysis of studies of the effect of coaching on SAT scores and found only dubious evidence for the claims made by coaching companies and publishers of test preparation materials that either courses or published materials have any significant effect on students' SAT scores.

2.5 External Standardized Exams in Bangladesh

Nusaiba (2020) has written about the massive importance attached to standardized exams in Bangladesh. According to her, the last few months of the year are nothing but commotion among high school or undergraduate seniors because of going abroad. Students search for the best agencies which will help them to assemble all the necessary documents and “produce and procure the best possible essays and recommendation letters” (Nusaiba, 2020, 1st paragraph). All these students have one thing in common which is “a plethora of colorful books” which they carry in the hopes of helping them to pass the standardized exams (Nusaiba, 2020, 1st paragraph). Since standardized tests are conducted in the English language, it has become an obstacle for the non-native English speakers in English. That is why a lot of Bangladeshi students “suffer on the English segment of the SAT but do considerably better in the Maths section” (Nusaiba, 2020, 4th paragraph).

Every year the number of standardized exam candidates is increasing in Bangladesh. Among all the standardized exams, IELTS has become a household name. Kar (2013), in his article “IELTS Preparation,” stated that the Registrar of British Council, Mr. Hannan Sarker claimed that about 15,000 to 20,000 candidates sit for the IELTS test in Bangladesh each

year. To secure high scores in tests they get admitted to various shadow educational institutions like private coaching centers. With the number of test-takers increasing, the overall band scores are also rising. Indeed, Pearson (2021) confirmed that Bangladesh is one of the three Asian countries with the highest rise in overall IELTS band scores.

Unfortunately, there are negative developments to this boost in popularity as well, as Kar (2013) shed some light on the negative consequences of IELTS in Bangladesh. He further quoted Dr. Arifa Rahman – she is a president of Bangladesh English Language Teachers' Association – who said that “IELTS coaching centers are doing more harm than good” (6th paragraph). She also added that despite charging a big sum, these IELTS instructors are not well qualified to teach the students.

2.6 Qualities of a Good Test

There are four characteristics of a test that test makers should keep in mind for making ideal tests:

2.6.1 Validity

A valid test means “whether a test measures what it aims to measure” (Galaczi, 2020, first paragraph). For example, in a Biology test if grammar mistakes are taken into account and significant marks are deducted because of them, then the test loses some of its validity. This is because the aim of the test is not to found how good the student is in grammar. This kind of unnecessary assessment criteria decreases the validity of a test.

2.6.2 Reliability

A test is reliable when the “same test to the same subjects or matched subjects on two different occasions would yield the same result” (Nicholson, 2015, p. 223). In other words, the test has to have clear instructions and not be so condensed that the student is unable to

complete it in time without significant fault on their part. A reliable test, therefore, will produce a similar score by the same student if they retake the test the next day without extra preparation.

2.6.3 Authenticity

For a test to be authentic, the lessons taught to the students should be related with real life situations. If the material or method in the test is not authentic then it “weakens the generalizability of result” (Spolsky, 1985, Abstract).

2.6.4 Practicality

In the book *Studying Speaking to Inform Second Language Learning*, the scholars Bachman and Palmer (1996) define test practicality as “the ratio between the resources available and the resources needed” (as cited in Boxer and Cohen, p. 285). For instance, if the test is valid and reliable, but if it is too expensive or impractical, it is wise not to implement the test. In the Bangladeshi context, it is quite impractical to assess the huge population’s speaking skills in, for example, SSC (Secondary School Certificate) and HSC (Higher School Certificate).

2.6.5 Washback

The impact of tests on students and their learning is the washback effect. This represents how teachers and students “do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning” (Messick, 1996, Abstract). Washback has both negative and positive effects on students and teachers. For instance, if the teachers are teaching students only for the sake of passing a test, then those tests tend to have a negative impact on the students as knowledge retention is not the focus. However, if a test encourages the student to

genuinely do good in exams and the teachers are also teaching the students to provide them with knowledge, then the test has a positive washback effect.

2.7 Impact of Language Learning

English is a global language which is used as a medium to interact with people from all over the world. It bridges the gap between different cultures and communities. Hence, apart from the native language, English is used as a second language in many countries across the globe. For higher education in a foreign language, even in non-European countries, there is almost no other alternative than to learn English. This is because in tertiary level education, English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI) is a choice besides the native language. Using English as a medium of instruction give students double benefits like “knowledge of their subject, plus English language skills” (Galloway, 2017). Hence, all these external standardized exams are also given in English and are meant to check foreign students’ proficiency in English. Language proficiency tests like IELTS and TOEFL are solely based on testing the student’s proficiency in English language. Besides, According to Skibba (2018) learning language enhances a student’s academic performance along with improving cognitive function of a brain.

2.8 The Gap in Literature

In this paper, I will be exploring areas that were not studied or were under-explored in the area of standardized exams in Bangladeshi context. For instance, how standardized exams are being conducted and what kind of means or preparations Bangladeshi students are taking to ace the exams like SAT, TOEFL, GMAT, and GRE – these are yet to be explored. As mentioned in the above section, only the preparation for the IELTS exams was studied. However, besides IELTS, there are many other standardized exams as discussed, none of

which are accounted for in the literature. Moreover, there is no document about the struggles and obstacles Bangladeshi face while preparing for such exams.

Although Zhengdong (2009) studied the exam preparation for Hong Kong students, in Bangladesh, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, no such study related to IELTS or other standardized exams have been done. In another study for developing English skills for TOEFL, it was found that students who enrolled in the USA program "demonstrated greater improvements on the Speaking and Writing sections" as compared to the students who studied in China (Ling et al., 2014, p. 13). On the other hand, students who were under the Chinese program have increased score "on the Reading and Listening sections more than the students in the US-based programs did" (Ling et al., 2014, p. 13). Such comparative study is yet to be done between Bangladeshi and many other ESL (English as a Second Language) nation's students. In another exploration study by Wilson (1985), GMAT practice test scores were higher for European countries' students and well-established English-speaking Asian countries (India, Malaysia, Philippines) than other Asian countries' students (Japan, Indonesia, Taiwan) and the Middle East.

Hence, as there is no proper research conducted on the students' experience and problems faced during external standardized exams, this study aims to find out why Bangladeshi students find it difficult to prepare for such standardized exams as IELTS, TOEFL, SAT, GMAT, and GRE.

3. Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach as it aims to explore, not identify or define, an area of research (Cresswell, 2012). The researcher has at first reviewed the literature, found a research gap, and made research questions. Using these research questions, the researcher has made interview questions and then conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 people. Further details of participants and data collection and analysis are explained from Section 3.5.

3.2 Research Aims

The aim of the research is to explore the difficulties faced by Bangladeshi people in their preparation for giving standardized language tests. To reach that goal, some enabling objectives are as follows:

1. To identify the average length of time spent in preparation for the standardized test
2. To explore what preparation techniques are used for the preparation phase
3. To find out the problems encountered during preparation

3.3 Research Questions

In order to reach the above-mentioned research aims, the following research questions are made:

1. How long do Bangladeshi people spend to prepare for a standardized language test?
2. What are the preparation strategies and techniques used by Bangladeshi people in their preparation phase for a standardized language test?
3. What are the problems Bangladeshi people encounter when preparing for a standardized language test?

3.4 Interview Questions

The research questions have been expanded in the following interview questions. However, since the interviews are not tightly structured, some interviews have had additional probing questions and/or some omissions. Also noteworthy is that there are two parts of each question. This is because the interviewee may have already given one or more standardized exams in the past – such interviewees will answer the first part of every question – whereas some are preparing to give a standardized exam or intends to give one in the near future – such interviewees will answer the second part of every question – and a third type of interviewee may in fact have experience of giving standardized exams in the past and also is studying for another subsequent standardized exam in the near future – such interviewees will answer both parts of every question.

1. Which standardized language exams have you partaken in? Or which do you intend to give in the future?
2. How have you prepared for that standardized exam? Or how do you intend to prepare for the upcoming standardized exam?
3. Have you attended any course or coaching for preparing for that standardized exam? Or do you intend to attend any course or coaching for preparing for that standardized exam?
4. Have you used any guidebooks or past question papers to prepare for that standardized exam? Or are you or do you intend to use any guidebooks or past question papers to prepare for that standardized exam?
5. Please explain some challenges and difficulties you faced when preparing for that standardized exam. Or please explain some challenges and difficulties you think you are facing or will face when preparing for that standardized exam.

6. Which part of the standardized exam (such as speaking, writing, reading, listening) have you faced the most difficulty in and why? Which part of the standardized exam (such as speaking, writing, reading, listening) do you think you are facing or you will face the most difficulty in and why?

3.5 Participants

There are in total 10 participants. Each of them has a different educational background. Out of ten, four of the participants (BM1, BM2, BM3, BM4) belong to Bangla Medium, two (EV1, EV2) from English version, and two (EM1, EM2) from English Medium. Participants from English Medium back are addressed as EM 1, 2 and 3. Bangla Mediums as BM 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. English versions as EV 1 and 2.

Table 3.5: Participant Profile

Name of Standardized Exams	Participants Name	Gender	Educational Background	Scores
IELTS	EV1	M	English Version	8.5
	BM2	M	Bangla Version	6.5
GMAT	EV2	M	English Version	700/800
	BM4	M	Bangla Medium	680/800
GRE	BM1	M	Bangla Version	310/340
	BM3	M	Bangla Version	290/340
SAT	EM1	M	English Medium	1350/1600
	EM2	M	English Medium	1260/1600
TOEFL	EM3	M	English Medium	92/120
	BM5	F	Bangla Medium	84/120

3.6 Data Collection Procedure

The process of data collection started with recording the interviews. Afterwards, the researcher took notes when listening to the interview recordings, and so did not transcribe the entirety of the interviews, but only the relevant information. This meant the omission of

hesitations (“ah,” “um,”), silence (ellipsis), tone, and body language. However, this should not take away from the authenticity of the findings, as any relevant extralinguistic factors are reported in this paper.

No significant challenges were faced during data collection, but time management was often difficult. Since COVID-19 has still not gone away, all interviews were conducted virtually. There were fortunately no significant network issues during those virtual interviews. However, it took weeks to manage participants for TOEFL and GMAT. Moreover, most of the participants have jobs and classes; hence, I did not always find them at my desired time. Since this is a qualitative venture, I have only taken 10 interviews. However, to boost reliability and trustworthiness, I have maintained stringent rigor while conducting the interviews and analyzing them.

3.7 Data Analysis Procedure

At first, I took notes while I was on the call with the interviewees. Codes were then extracted from the transcripts and then subsequently converted to themes. The researcher inspected this procedure rigorously to make sure all relevant themes are found. Afterwards, the themes were described in this report in the form of subsections in Section 4.

4. Chapter Four: Findings

The findings have been divided into several segments which will make it easier to focus on each part individually. Then themes were generated from the notes the researcher made during the interviews.

4.1 Background and English Language Exposure

This sub-section relates the participants' exposure to the English language outside of their academic life to their standardized language exam preparation and results. Especially high exposure to the target language makes an individual learn faster rather than just studying the language from books. Hence, Growing up in a certain environment can highly impact one's way of communicating in English. Exposure to English language in a student's life can have "a positive correlation to language proficiency in the areas of reading, writing, listening and speaking" (Domingo, 2019, p. 1) Therefore, the researcher found out while taking interviews that the interviewees who had exposure to the English language outside of their school and colleges are on a different level than students who grew up with close to no exposure to English.

Firstly, Participant BM2 had very little exposure to English while growing up; he grew up with two other brothers who also went to Bangla medium school. His friends belong to the same educational background as him; hence, they always joked and chatted in Bangla. As for watching English shows, BM2 said "I only used to watch English cartoons as a kid but mostly I was interested in watching Hindi movies and Bangla shows". Therefore, growing up he had minimal contact to English language. His IELTS score is 6.5

EV1 is a student from English version. He grew up watching anime and playing games from a very young age. In his interview, he said "My ability to speak and understand

English is not something I gained by reading academic books; rather, it came from watching anime and from playing games”. Besides, most of his books being written in English except for the Bangla books also contributed to his English skills. Added to all that was the fact that he was also very good at his studies which was reflected in his IELTS score (8.5).

BM1 also is a student of the Bangla version but while taking his interview the researcher found out about his interest in watching English television shows. During his interview he stated that “I have watched in total about 60 English shows”. He further added, from his childhood, he always got good marks in English. As a result, his sincerity towards his studies and interest in English shows combined together to help him become a good user of the English language.

EM1 studied in English medium all his life. Apart from his English-speaking environment at school, he also uses the English language to chat with his friends on social media. Besides, he watches anime and various other English shows which gave him a lot of exposure to English outside of his academic life.

On the other hand, BM3 has very little exposure to English. He grew up in a household where everyone went to Bangla medium school. He had no way of communicating in English; he said “even with my friends I always spoke Bangla” as all of them are from the same educational background. BM3 mostly watched cartoons and Bangla channels which did not help much with the exposure to the English language. Moreover, he acknowledged that he finds it difficult to be confident in English as he is a Bangla medium student.

EM2 grew up watching anime and WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment). Besides this, his main motivation to learn good English was because of one of his teachers motivating him. He was very moved by that situation when he got good feedback on his English writing when he was in class three. Hence, from that day onwards he never let an opportunity pass by

which would help him to improve his skill even more. Because of his English medium background and exposure, he did relatively well in his SAT exam (1260 out of 1600).

EV2 studied in English version all his life but he was well exposed to English outside of his school because of his multiple visits to the United States. He would visit as his sister lives there and would stay for months. He even made a few friends during his stay in the US. Besides, he also mentioned that “My language skills got better because I used to read Harry Potter books in English”. Because of his extraordinary exposure to English, he performed well in his GMAT (700 out of 800).

BM4 exposure to the English language was only limited, and used it only during his English classes – because all the rest of the subjects are taught in Bangla. Outside his school, he would not use English much. However, he mentioned “I occasionally watched popular shows during my free time” but according to him, he was an individual who preferred outdoor activities over indoor ones. Hence, he was not very much familiar with English movies and shows, though his GMAT score was not low (680 out of 800).

EM3 has been in an English medium background all his life. He even lived in London for two years. Moreover, most of his family members can speak English fluently. Clearly, growing up he had a lot of exposure to English. All these exposure made it easier for him to get a good score in TOEFL (92 out of 120). Unlike EM3, the participant BM5 did not have that much exposure to English. She said “the little exposure I had was from the movies and cartoons I used to watch occasionally”. However, she still managed to get a decent TOEFL score (84 out of 120).

4.2 Choice of Discipline

This section discusses how their choice of discipline has impacted the results of the standardized exams.

BM2 belongs to the Commerce study group and for this undergrad, he chose BBA as his major. Throughout his school and college life, the medium of instruction was in Bangla. Also, since he does not belong to the Arts group and is not a student of the English major this could have impacted his low score in the IELTS result. EV1 was from Science background and he chose EEE as his major for his undergrad program. Even though he is from the Science group he still managed to score really high in the IELTS exam. BM1 also took science in both school and college. For his undergrad program, he has taken CSE as his major. Him being from the Science discipline helped him with mathematical problems like calculus, linear algebra, and number theory.

As for EM1, he is also a student from a science background and gave SAT exam after completing his A levels exam. Even though SAT does not have a separate Science section still it is blended throughout the exams; which was a plus point for EM1 as he is from a Science background and helped him to secure a decent score. BM3 took science in school but later on, he shifted to commerce group in college. His undergrad major is BBA. Since BM3 is from a Business background, this might have helped to some extent in sections where Business math was required to be answered. EM2 took science in his A levels and O Levels. Later on, he pursued English as his undergrad major. Hence, his choice of major helped him in the Writing and reading section which aided him in achieving a good SAT score.

EV2 took science at both SSC and HSC levels. His major for the undergraduate program was BBA and he gave GMAT to shift his credits to a university in Germany for a Masters in Economics. Both his disciplines in school and university helped him in respective

sections; which is why he managed to get attain a good GMAT score. BM4 belongs to the commerce study group and his university major was BBA. His Business major was an advantage when he had to answer the quantitative reasoning part in the GMAT exam. Therefore, the impact of his discipline helped him to secure the kind of score he got on the GMAT.

EM3 took science in his A levels but what contributed more to his TOEFL scores was his English medium educational background. As he is used to studying all the materials in English; it must have gave him an upper hand while preparing for TOEFL. BM5 also took science in her school but unlike EM3 she did not study them in English rather everything was in Bangla. Hence, it could have been a factor which affected her TOEFL scores to some extent.

From the discussion of this section, we can conclude that the choice of discipline can play a factor in determining standardized language exam success, but it is trumped by the background and language exposure of the participants.

4.3 Preparation and Results

One of the most notable factors that the researcher found out while taking interviews was that how each student took a different approach in preparing for their exam. Some of them took help from multiple sources whereas, some students managed to do everything on their own. BM2 did 15 days of self-study before getting admitted to British Council for a one-month IELTS course. During these 15 days, he watched a YouTube video from a channel named “Adam’s English Lessons.” Then he further added that “I practiced grammar from my college’s Advance Learners book”. Later on, he enrolled for the IELTS course where he used to practice all the sheets/notes taught in the class. He even gave a mock test to prepare himself even better. Taking all these steps he scored overall 6.5 points.

EV1 went to PIE Education and did IELTS classes for 15 days. Besides, for the listening and reading part, he followed a YouTube channel called “Learn with Sam and Ash”. Moreover, he solved sample questions from Cambridge IELTS (10-15) books. For speaking, EV1 watched several mocks from the “AEHelp” YouTube channel and practiced along with the videos. For the writing section, he downloaded a few samples from IELTS Liz’s website and went through them to get an idea of the writing standards of different bands. His overall IELTS score was 8.5.

Participant BM1 studied from the 5LB book of GRE practice problems by Manhattan Prep. He also participated in multiple mock tests that are available online. He didn't attend any courses or coaching for preparing for the exam. His GRE score is 310 out of 340. BM1 took about one month time to make preparations for his exam. BM3 on the other hand went to the Mentors coaching center for 3 months. For the verbal reasoning part, he said “I used to learn vocabulary from the Advanced Grammar and Vocabulary book”. And also used to practice at home by giving tests online on Udemy. His GRE score is 290 out of 340.

EM1 didn’t do any coaching and studied himself for 2 months. He used books and practiced tests of the following, Kaplan, Barron’s, Erica L. Meltzer, and Khan Academy. His SAT score is 1350 out of 1600. EM2 enrolled in Mentor’s coaching classes for about a month for SAT exams and only learn whatever was taught in the coaching. He did not take any extra preparation apart from his coaching classes. He managed to score 1260 out of 1600. EV2 did not go to any coaching center and rather did self-study at home for one month. He took help from various books and practiced tests online – for example, Manhattan prep online forum, GMAT prep by Magoosh, E-GMAT, Blog post about Math in GMAT Math forum, and Veritas Prep GMAT by Karishma. He got 700 out of 800 in his GMAT exam. BM4 did two

months of coaching in Mentors and followed books like Total GMAT Math by Jeff Sackman and GMAT Advanced Quant by Manhattan Prep. He managed to get 680 out 800.

EM3 did coaching for 1 month in Mentors and only learnt what was given by the coaching. This got him a score of 92 out of 120 in TOEFL. BM5 not only did coaching for one month but also self-studied for about a month before enrolling for coaching classes. She studied books like Barron's TOEFL, Official TOEFL Test Volume 1, and TOEFL iBT Prep Plus in her home. All these preparations helped her to get a score of 84 out of 120.

4.4 Challenges Faced

When asked about the difficulties, participant BM2 said “in IELTS exam, speaking test was the most challenging part for me”. He was never confident about his pronunciation and would often mix up short and long vowel sounds. He further stated “I took pauses and did frequent self-correction while speaking”. Moreover, BM2 struggled in organizing and linking ideas while writing. BM1 faced the most difficulty in the speaking part of the exam. As English is not his first language, it was difficult to think of the answers to the questions in such a short period of time and also answer them without sufficient practice. Similarly, BM4 also found it difficult in GMAT exam to complete an analytical writing assessment to be completed by 30 minutes. Besides time management, as a non-native speaker of English, he found the verbal section very challenging.

Another participant EV1 found it hard to search for quality samples of the writing part as most of them require buying subscriptions. The samples provided in the Cambridge IELTS practice books are of mixed bands hence very few samples actually met the requirements of his desired target band. EM1 said during the interview that “I struggled with attempting to recreate SAT test conditions during practice at home”. Some of the things taught in SAT were not taught to him in school. Hence, he faced problems solving those questions in the

exam. Moreover, the questions were so long that it took him a lot of time to read and understand the questions. Therefore, he was left with very little time to write the answers.

Participant EM2 also found it significantly difficult to complete the test in the given time. He could not even finish answering all his questions. EV2 also had a similar problem of time constraint in the GMAT exam. He found data sufficiency in the quantitative section to be the most challenging. EV2 said he finds it tricky as one needs to be very strategic and organized while answering Data sufficiency questions from the beginning. Interviewee EM3 and BM5 also went through the problem of lack of sufficient time. BM5 especially found the reading part to be more difficult than other parts. She further added that “even though I learned lots of new vocabularies still I felt it was not enough while giving the test.”

5. Chapter Five: Discussion

From the above findings, some recognizable patterns have manifested. For example, we have come to know about how both the IELTS participators – BM2 and EV1 – enrolled for coaching in order to prepare for the test. They also took help from YouTube channels to further polish their skills. However, due to their linguistic capability, language exposure, and educational background, they have very different results from one another. In other words, EV1 performed significantly better than BM2 – 8.5 and 6.5.

The TOEFL participants EM3 and BM5 both took coaching classes. BM5 also self-studied alongside coaching. Nonetheless, EM3 has better score (92 out of 120) than BM5 (84 out of 120). Since EM3 had more exposure to English and also belongs to English medium background; these two factors definitely played a vital role in securing a better TOEFL point for EM3. (English language exposure citation).

As for the GRE test, the interviewees BM1 and BM3 both – as clear from their pseudonyms – are from Bangla medium. Even though they have the same educational background, BM1 (310 out of 340) performed better than BM3 (290 out of 340) in the exam. In this case, in my opinion, exposure, rather than the background (as both had similar backgrounds), to the English language played a big role. BM3 did not grow up with enough exposure to the English language – the result of which can be seen in his not-so-decent GRE score. On the contrary, BM1 had a huge influence on the English television shows he grew up watching.

EM1 and EM2 both are from English medium backgrounds and both gave SAT exams. However, EM1 did better results (1350 out of 1600) than EM2 (1260 out of 1600) even though EM2 did coaching for the test and EM1 only did self-study at home for two months. Here, we can see that enrolling in a coaching center does not guarantee anyone a

good SAT score. Sometimes, self-study at home also proves to be more helpful than coaching classes. However, having said it, this is definitely not certain; one's potential may show in coaching classes and another's during the self-study. Self-study brings out "the ability to progress without reliance on a teacher" in a student (Why self-learning is important, 2020). Simply put, it varies from person to person.

Another such example where self-study is proven to be more beneficial is in the case of EV2 and BM4. EV2 managed to get a comparatively better GMAT score (700/800) than BM4 (680/700) by self-studying at home for about a month. BM4, on the other hand, did coaching for two months for the GMAT. However, EV2, belonging from an English version, has a head start in such a standardized exam. This is a key point that is to be considered while differentiating or contrasting their scores. Learning in traditional classroom setting or coaching are not for everyone. There are students that focus better when they study themselves. It teaches the students to assess their own growth and also "helps to solidify the learning" (Why self-learning is important, 2020).

In regards to preparation time of the participators, it has been found out that among these 10 participants the minimum time spent in preparation was 15 days and the maximum was three months. As we know, the duration or length of time in preparing generally plays a key role in achieving a good result. However, in this study, there are exceptions which were found as well – for instance, the participant EV1 partook in IELTS coaching classes for 15 days and did self-study alongside it. In such a short period of time, EV1 managed to score 8.5 on the test. Of course, there are other factors to be considered as well like him being a highly linguistically competent person gives him a huge advantage. Contrariwise, BM2 took 1-month coaching classes and before enrolling in a coaching center he self-studied at home as well for around 15 days. Although he took a long time to prepare, this did not bring positive

effects in his results (the test score being 6.5). This proves besides preparation length there are other factors like education background, English language exposure, and linguistic capabilities that highly affect a student's performance. Since BM2 lacked in all the other factors, despite giving time, his results were not very satisfactory (6.5 in IELTS).

Moreover, as mentioned, education background was not always the deterministic factor for standardized language exam success. For instance, BM1 and BM3 sat for GRE tests. Despite sharing the same educational background, BM1 secured better results (310 out of 340) than BM3 (290 out of 340). To add more, BM3 even did coaching classes for 3 months whereas BM1 self-studied for about a month. This discrepancy can be pointed to English language exposure, as BM1 grew up with enough exposure even though he studied in a Bangla medium institute. On top of that, he has always been academically competent and can definitely be considered as one of those students that have high English language proficiency despite being from a Bangla medium background. On the other hand, BM3 grew up speaking and listening to Bangla whether it is at his school or home. Hence, even though both BM 1 and BM 3 performed well in GRE, the differences in their preparation duration and the subsequent results can be attributed to their differing language exposures.

Consequently, in the above discussions, it is stated how the participators BM2 and BM3 failed to get decent scores in IELTS and GRE despite them taking months to prepare. On the other hand, EV1 and BM1 who took less preparation in comparison (15 days of coaching and 1 month of self-study) scored significantly high in their standardized exams. One of the main reasons for seeing this significant difference in their score is due to the exposure to the English language while growing up. The importance of being groomed in an environment where one has access to English TV shows, cartoons, and games can essentially contribute to a child's language proficiency from an early age. Outside classroom language

exposure can help the students “to improve their English language and to express themselves in the target language” (Al-Zoubi, 2018, p. 152). Therefore, even after taking more time for preparing, BM2 and BM3 could not get satisfactory scores, especially in relation to EV1 and BM1.

Furthermore, the interviewees EM1 and EM2 gave SAT. Although they belong to the same educational background and their exposure to the English language was quite good growing up, still EM1 scored better (1350 out of 1600) than EM2 (1260 out of 1600). Nonetheless, EM2 gave an exam at such a time when he was preparing for other standardized language exams like IELTS and other extra-curricular tasks like pursuing a driving license. Hence, this definitely took a toll on him. Therefore, having to deal with more than one exam can definitely affect one’s result.

In the course of the interview, some of the participants talked about how it would have been convenient for them if more time was given to answer. As EM1 said earlier, so much time was consumed in reading and understanding the lengthy questions in SAT exam that he was left with very little time to answer. EM2 and EV2 also faced the time constraint problem in SAT and GMAT exam. Moreover, there were a lot of topics that were not taught to EM1 at school which put him at a disadvantage during the test. All these drawbacks and obstacles question the validity and reliability of a test. A test, as discussed, is valid only if it tests what it is supposed to test. If there are topics in the test that are coming outside the syllabus, then the test loses its validity. Since a test is needed to be valid first to be reliable, hence with its lack of validity the test has lost its reliability as well. Granted, there were no complaints regarding the practicality and authenticity of the tests from the participants.

Every test has a washback effect on the students: it can be negative or positive washback. These tests are no exceptions. Even though these are not board exams like SSC

and HSC, still these are considered high-stakes tests. These high stakes exams can change a student's academic direction. These are taken so that students can get enrolled in their desired universities in abroad. It is important to do well in these exams because without meeting a certain set of criteria, the student will not be able to get into the university he/she applied for. Therefore, students try their best to ace the exams and get as much of a good score possible. It thus gives them motivation to do better in search of a better future. Hence, it has a positive effect on the students. Regarding negative washback, even though there is scope for students to feel pressurized to prepare extensively, this study has not found anyone who spent extensive time in preparation, though many challenges, as discussed, have been identified.

In the findings part, we have seen how language exposure affects the student's test scores. Due to high English language exposure, participants like BM1, EM1, EV1, EV2, and EM3 achieved better scores than the rest. Even though other participators gave more time in preparing for these external standardized exams, still it result in them attaining high scores. In the end, students exposed to the English language scored better than those who comparatively had little exposure. A similar result is found in a study done by Wilson (1985) where students from European countries and those highly exposed to the English language in Asian countries like India, Malaysia, and the Philippines scored higher in GMAT. Whereas, students belonging to Asian countries (Taiwan, Japan, Indonesia, and Korea) with less exposure to the English language and the Middle East scored lower. Specifically, in this study, EV2 – a student from English version and who had high English exposure – scored higher than BM4 – a student from Bangla medium and who had low English exposure. Hence, this study and the study conducted by Wilson have similar findings.

Another such finding is that in this paper it is seen that participants from the English medium or English version did not face problems in the speaking section during these

external standardized exams. Difficulties in speaking and writing were mostly faced by students from Bangla medium. For instance, participants like BM1 and BM5 mentioned that speaking part was the most challenging for them; On the other hand, no English medium or English version student acknowledged speaking difficulty in the interviews. Besides speaking skills, BM4 and BM2 also mentioned that writing part was difficult for them. All these challenges and difficulties are mentioned in section 4.4. A much similar outcome is found in a research study conducted by Ling et al. (2014), which found discrepancies between native and non-native speaking backgrounds regarding TOEFLS scores. Thus, this study confirms many others in the literature.

6. Conclusion

This section concludes the research project by proffering some guidelines for researchers in this field. Finally, it summarizes the main findings of this study.

6.1 Summary

To sum up, from this study a lot of factors were found that contribute to and affects the preparation of the students for high stakes exams. Besides coaching classes and self-studying there are other elements like language exposure, linguistic capability, and education background that need to be considered. For instance, participants like BM2, BM4, BM3, and BM5 did coaching for months and even self-studied before enrolling in the coaching class. Nonetheless, their scores were still comparatively less than the other participants. All these interviewees grew up with little exposure to English. Hence, it reflects in their test scores.

However, there are exceptions as well; for example, even though EM2 was very exposed to English, he still managed to get less (1260/1600) than EM1's score (1350/1600). This is because SAT exams are not only based on English language proficiency but there is a Math section as well. Moreover, since EM2 earlier in the interview mentioned that he studied nothing outside of coaching classes and also there was a problem with time management. Hence, even from being an English medium background student and growing up exposed to the English language may not result in similar success due to the discussed reasons.

Furthermore, one's choice of discipline also has great impact on these scores. For example, BM1 was a science student in both his school and university life; hence, it helped him to solve math problems on the GRE test. Similarly, BM4 has been a business student all his life; therefore, it gave him an advantage during his GMAT exam while solving the

quantitative reasoning section. Thus, different types of factors are having an impact on how the students preparing and also performing in high stakes exams.

6.2 Recommendations

Future researchers are recommended to compare and contrast among High stakes exams to find out the level of difficulty in language proficiency in GMAT, GRE, SAT, IELTS, and TOEFL. Because even though IELTS and TOEFL are especially language proficiency tests, the other three – GMAT, GRE, and SAT – also have a section where language proficiency is measured. It can be compared how the English language benchmark for each test is very different. Moreover, another line of study recommended is to distinguish between general IELTS and Academics IELTS, not to mention between IELTS and TOEFL.

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