The Challenges of Implementing the Emirates Standardized Test as a Proficiency Test in the UAE: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract. This study investigated teachers' and educational leaders' perspectives regarding the challenges that EFL twelfth graders encounter in relation to the Emirates Standardized Test (EmSAT). The study context was a private school in the UAE that follows the Ministry of Education curriculum. The present qualitative study adopted the phenomenological interpretive research approach. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with four English teachers and four educational leaders. Data were also analysed using thematic analysis that led to the creation of relevant themes. The findings revealed a number of challenges related to the EmSAT exam and recommendations to overcome these barriers. These included issues related to time constraints, anxiety, stress, lack of teaching resources, and learners' low e-maturity level. The study had some implications for teachers, educational leaders, school administrations and policymakers.

Keywords: EmSAT English · Standardized test · Proficiency test · Educational leaders · EFL teachers

1 Introduction

In the UAE, the English language is gaining a significant position as it is thoroughly employed in the business, technology, and trade sectors (Madden, 2020). The vision of the UAE Ministry of Education (2017–2021) was built upon the principle that younger generations have the right to interact and engage with the whole world using English, the most common language. As such, students in the UAE are expected to show good proficiency in English language exams in line with the internationally recognized exam results. Among these proficiency tests is the EmSAT exam, a compulsory requirement for UAE twelfth graders to graduate from high school and become eligible for university admission (Al Hammadi and Mohiuddin, 2017).

1.1 The Research Problem

Data generated by the Abu Dhabi Educational Council (ADEC) reveal that almost 95% of high school graduates do not meet universities' admission standards, especially with

regard to EmSAT scores (Harold, 2005; Matsumoto, 2019). In addition, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) reports that, although the UAE has a fast-growing educational system, its students continue to demonstrate a very weak performance in international and national assessments, including EmSAT, compared to their peers in advanced economies (Kippels and Ridge, 2019; OECD, 2015). Despite all these challenges, the researcher could not identify a single study investigating the difficulties that twelve graders encounter regarding the UAE's EmSAT exam. As such, the current study proposes to fill in this gap in the literature by investigating these challenges from the perspectives of teachers and educational leaders.

1.2 Rational and Significance

The current study's rationale stems from how student assessment in the UAE is considered a significant benchmarking tool and credible means of evaluating education improvement (Ibrahim and Alhosani, 2020). Moreover, there is a necessity to investigate teachers' and educational leaders' perceptions of the EmSAT exam to identify practical measures in which students and teachers can overcome the exam challenges. Furthermore, the study findings will serve as the baseline of further research investigating students' and educators' perceptions with regard to international assessments such as PISA, TIMSS, IELTS and TOEFL, as well as national assessments such as EmSAT.

1.3 Research Questions

1. What are the perspectives of English teachers regarding the challenges of implementing the EmSAT exam?
2. What are the perspectives of educational leaders regarding the challenges of passing the EmSAT exam?
3. What are the recommendations of English teachers and educational leaders regarding overcoming the challenges encountered through taking the EmSAT exam?
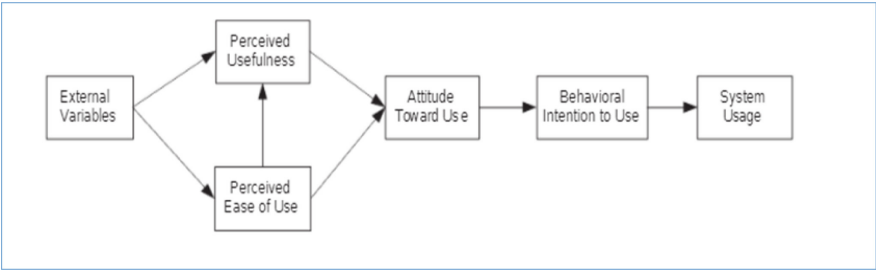
2 Literature Review

This section elucidates the theoretical underpinning upon which the research has been based and provides a review of previous literature on standardized testing.

2.1 Theoretical Framework

Computer-based assessment (CBA) has emerged as a prominent method for evaluating the academic progress of students in both secondary and tertiary education (Maqableh, 2015). Previous models that depend on technology utilization, such as Davis's (1986) Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), have given way to this one. CBA is defined by Charman and Elmes 1998 as the evaluation that results from the learner's interaction with the computer. Numerous factors contribute to the advantages of utilizing CBA, including results that are accurate, cost-effective, and secure (Kreiter et al., 1999). Exam scheduling, result generation and analysis, and exam preparation time and effort reduction are

all tasks that CBA is likely to facilitate (Ko and Cheng, 2008). The current study is also grounded in the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), which was developed by Davis in 1986. TAM has been chosen as the paradigm that effectively examines the impact of technology usage on the technological behaviour of students. Assumedly, the utilization of a system is the consequence of an anticipated response induced by motivation, which is influenced by an additional external stimulus (Al-Azawei et al., 2019) (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Technology Accepted Model (TAM)

2.2   Previous Studies

This section provides a review of the existing literature regarding the benefits and challenges of conducting standardized tests.

The Usefulness of Standardized Tests
A number of studies stated that standardized tests are beneficial as they measure students' attainment in different areas and evaluate teachers' performance (Brown, 2019; Lai, 2023). However, some researchers are against using standardized test scores to judge teachers' achievement and performance as they believe it is insufficient to evaluate teachers (Salend, 2019; Turnipseed and Darling-Hammond, 2015). In the same vein, some researchers highlighted different aspects regarding the significance of standardized tests, including making teachers work harder and reforming the educational system by running remedial programs for struggling learners (Lai, 2023). By means of elaboration, Lai (2023) concurred that standardized tests create a healthy educational atmosphere since they promote peer tutoring, help struggling students get the required attention and care in order to make them pass tests, and encourage investing for teachers' professional development programs to promote academic achievement and performance.

The Challenges of Standardized Tests
Despite the benefits of standardized tests, there are many challenges related to them. For example, some researchers concurred that these tests have minimal alignment with the local curriculum and are inaccurate indicators of learners' exact levels (Wise, 2019). In addition, some researchers, such as Sulastri and Puspawati (2019), mentioned that standardized tests are always biased since any individual can be taught and tested under the same exam conditions. On the contrary, Brown (2019) disregarded these claims and

reported no proof that exam bias is a critical problem. Furthermore, they stated that plenty of exam writers exert much effort to eliminate all bias-related issues of tests (Goodman and Hambleton, 2005). Nonetheless, some studies identified exam anxiety and fear as a challenge that affected students' exam results (Edriss and Matthew, 2016; Kohn, 2000). These findings were in harmony with other studies in which standardized tests were claimed to determine learners' performance and achievement levels without considering the factors that might have affected them on the exam day, such as fear, family issues and anxiety (Wise, 2019).

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Methodology and Approach

The current study adopted the phenomenological interpretive research approach to investigate teachers' and educational leaders' perceptions of the main obstacles of assessing twelfth graders using the EmSAT exam. The choice of the phenomenological interpretive approach served the purpose of the study and the research questions by obtaining social reality and interpreting meaning from the collected data of the targeted participants (Viswambharan and Priya, 2016).

3.2 Research Instruments and Data Collection

Qualitative data were collected using two sets of semi-structured interviews in which the open-ended nature of the questions defines the topic being investigated and provides opportunities for the interviewer and participants to discuss some topics in depth. The choice of semi-structured interviews served the purpose of the study in which the researcher tried to identify teachers' and educational leaders' perceptions of the challenges of the EmSAT exam and the recommendations they perceive to overcome these barriers.

3.3 Participants and Sampling Techniques

Participants of the present study were four English teachers who taught grade 12 students at a private school in RAK, UAE and four educational leaders, including the school principal, head of assessment, head of the English department and head of academic affairs. The school was a private school following the UAE Ministry of Education curriculum. The selection of participants was based on convenience and purposive sampling. According to Creswell and Poth (2016), convenience sampling is the most commonly used in qualitative research since it is fast and easy to achieve the sample size. In addition, purposive sampling is employed with the educational leaders since they possess rich expertise and knowledge, which the researcher sought to obtain.

3.4 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis (TA). Boyatzis (1998) argued that TA is a qualitative method that helps to analyse classifications and provide relevant themes. Moreover, TA is significant in studies that attempt to investigate a phenomenon using interpretations. The choice of TA was due to its flexibility which can easily be modified based on the researcher's needs (Braun and Clarke, 2006). As such, data collected from semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and arranged into relevant, meaningful themes that answered the three research questions of the present study.

4   Findings and Discussion

The study results were reported according to the order of the research questions that governed the scope of the study.

4.1   Findings of RQ1

What are the perspectives of English teachers regarding the challenges of implementing the EmSAT exam?

English Teachers' Perspectives on the Challenges of the EmSAT Exam
English teachers identified a number of challenges that twelfth graders face regarding the EmSAT exam. For example, two participants stated that exam anxiety, fear and timing were among students' most prominent obstacles. One participant mentioned, " *The EmSAT exam questions are computerized and timed in a way that does not allow students to think well before selecting an answer. This is because the time allotted per question in the grammar and vocabulary sections ranges from 18 to 40 s."* This result was confirmed by another participant who concluded that *"Timing is a critical issue for students since it is very short and does not differentiate between students of good level and struggling students. This causes students fear and anxiety; they randomly answer questions within the given time."*

All participants confirmed that the writing section of the exam was also problematic for most students as it required them to type their answer rather than write it using paper and pencil as they are used to. Besides, among the challenges of the EmSAT exam, as identified by English teachers, was the lack of resources and study materials to prepare for the exam. The majority of participants agreed that the EmSAT exam skills needed to be taught to students to get acquainted with its content and requirements. However, this was not fulfilled since there were no books, resources, or study materials to prepare for the exam. On the contrary, one participant disagreed, and he believed that the exam covers accumulative skills that should not be restricted to a single study book or a set of resources.

4.2   Findings of RQ2

What are the perspectives of educational leaders regarding the challenges of passing the EmSAT test?

Educational Leaders' Perspectives on the Challenges of the EmSAT Exam

Educational leaders explained a number of challenges regarding the EmSAT exam, which were quite different from those reported by teachers. For example, the school principal averred, "*Lack of teacher training about the exam's structure, content, and administration is the most significant challenge since teachers can never prepare students without being trained to do so.*" The head of the assessment department confirmed this point by saying, "*It seems that teachers are misplaced and forgotten when it comes to the EmSAT exam preparation and administration.*" Regarding university admission, the head of academic affairs argued that the EmSAT exam is a requirement for high school graduation, and it has been planned to guarantee admission to all universities in the UAE. However, a few universities accept the exam for admissions, and the vast majority reject it for the sake of other international exams such as TOEFL and IELTS. Furthermore, she added that "*This is a real challenge as it acts against the basic motives of starting the EmSAT exam in that students avoid studying a foundation year.*"

4.3 Findings of RQ3

What are the recommendations of the English teachers and educational leaders regarding overcoming the challenges encountered through taking the EmSAT Test?

Overcoming the Challenges of the EmSAT Exam

Most participants averred that integrating the EmSAT exam into the English curriculum would make it more familiar to students, increasing their success rate. Furthermore, few participants emphasized the necessity to design a study book and a set of resources that reflect the exam components in order to prepare students for the exam. Regarding training teachers and students, most participants stated, "*Students need to receive sufficient training on how to increase their e-maturity level and how to type using computer software. Similarly, teachers must be trained on the exam content and administration to support students more effectively.*" However, some participants recommend reconsidering the time assigned per question to ensure that students of different abilities can answer each question within the given time. This would reduce exam anxiety and fear, resulting in better performance. In addition, a few participants disagreed with adding more time for each question of the exam, and they recommend providing more practice exams that imitate the real exam environment as a better method of avoiding fear and worries. Moreover, regarding technology failure, most participants reported, "*A backup plan has to be ready where students can do the exam using paper-pencil in case of technology failure, but most importantly is that students need to be ready for this step through training.*"

4.4 Discussion

The findings of the study showed that there were many challenges regarding the EmSAT exam, as reported by teachers and educational leaders. For example, English teachers believed the exam time was very short, which caused stress, anxiety and fear. This was also thought to negatively affect twelfth graders' achievement and performance during the exam. These findings were in harmony with previous studies (e.g., Edriss and

Matthew, 2016; Lai, 2023). On the contrary, other studies concluded that standardized tests promoted peer tutoring and created a healthy educational environment (Baird et al., 2011; Sulastri and Puspawati, 2019). Another challenge was that the EmSAT exam was neither integrated nor aligned with the English curriculum, making it problematic to practice the exam content. This result was consistent with the findings of previous research (e.g., Mehrens and Lehmann, 1991; Gunes, 2019). Moreover, students' low e-maturity level was another obstacle preventing them from effectively interacting with the exam, especially with the writing section. The findings of the study also demonstrated some challenges as identified by educational leaders, including the lack of teacher training regarding the exam components and administration. Teachers were disregarded from exam preparation and administration, although they are considered the most influential party in increasing student achievement. This contradicts the findings reached by Imsa-ard (2020), in which teachers had a positive attitude towards computerized exams. Additionally, the findings confirmed that the exam was not a guarantee of admission to all universities in the UAE as it had been planned.

5 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.1 Summary and Key Findings

This research examined the viewpoints of educators and leaders in education regarding the difficulties that were encountered throughout the EmSAT examination. By conducting a thorough analysis of the participant's viewpoint on the subject under investigation, this qualitative study achieved its aims and responded to its primary research inquiries through the application of phenomenological interpretive research. To acquire the necessary data and address the research inquiries, two sets of interview questions were employed. Insufficient teacher preparation, lack of resources, and the potential for technological failures were among the numerous obstacles identified in the study's results regarding the administration of the EmSAT. In addition, the results indicated that anxiety, fear, and poor performance resulted from students' insufficient exam time and inadequate e-maturity to respond to all questions. Moreover, in order to surmount these obstacles, the results suggest crucial strategies including enhancing the efficacy of the English curriculum, integrating the EmSAT exam competencies into the curriculum, and providing comprehensive teacher training.

5.2 Limitations

The study has a number of limitations, including the small number of participants, which caused a challenge related to the generalizability of the findings. The study is also limited to one context (a private school in RAK), which does not make it representative of other schools in other emirates in the UAE. Another limitation is related to data collection since the researcher has only implemented semi-structured interviews without adopting another tool to ensure data triangulation which would enhance the validity and reliability of the findings.

5.3   Recommendations

One recommendation is for the assessment unit at the Ministry of Education to consider the challenges faced by students, teachers and educational leaders and work effectively to overcome them. Another recommendation is for school administrations to provide much support and training for teachers and students on the most effective strategies to deal with the EmSAT exam to ensure increasing student achievement and performance. A final recommendation is for English teachers to adopt their lesson planning and activity preparation in line with the exam specifications and requirements.

5.4   Implications for Further Research

Further research is needed to increase the number of participants and involve different contexts to identify the possibility of obtaining consistent results from the present study. A key aspect of future research is to use quantitative research methods to generate numeric data that could be used to validate the findings of the present paper.

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