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THE SHIFT OF THE ENGLISH PAPER FROM COMPULSORY TO ELECTIVE STATUS IN THE NATIONAL UPPER-SECONDARY SCHOOL EXAM IN VIETNAM: IMPACTS ON TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT FROM TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract: The study examines the effects of shifting the English paper from a compulsory to an elective status in Vietnam's national upper-secondary school exam on teaching and assessment practices from the perspective of teachers. Drawing on a mixed-methods research design, the study combines quantitative data from a questionnaire administered to 990 teachers and qualitative responses from 53 participants to explore how this policy shift is perceived. Findings indicate mixed reactions, with most teachers expressing concerns about decreased student motivation and classroom engagement, as well as a lack of clear objectives in English education. The study provides insights into the immediate impacts on instructional strategies and highlights the complexities of the policy's implementation in Vietnam. These results contribute to ongoing debates about language education reform in Vietnam, especially concerning how high-stakes testing influences teaching as well as assessment and testing practices.

Keywords: English exam, teaching, testing and assessment, washback, upper-secondary

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VIỆC CHUYỂN BÀI THI TIẾNG ANH TỪ BẮT BUỘC SANG TỰ CHỌN TRONG KỲ THI TỐT NGHIỆP TRUNG HỌC PHỔ THÔNG QUỐC GIA Ở VIỆT NAM: TÁC ĐỘNG ĐẾN DẠY HỌC VÀ KIỂM TRA ĐÁNH GIÁ TỪ GÓC NHÌN CỦA GIÁO VIÊN

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này xem xét những tác động của việc không bắt buộc học sinh phải thi bài thi môn tiếng Anh trong kỳ thi tốt nghiệp Trung học phổ thông quốc gia ở Việt Nam đối với công tác dạy học và kiểm tra đánh giá từ góc độ của giáo viên. Dựa trên phương pháp nghiên cứu hỗn hợp, nghiên cứu này kết hợp dữ liệu định lượng từ bảng câu hỏi được phân phát cho 990 giáo viên và các câu trả lời định tính từ 53 người tham gia. Kết quả cho thấy phản ứng trái chiều, với phần lớn giáo viên bày tỏ lo ngại về việc giảm động lực học tập và tham gia của học sinh, cũng như sự thiếu rõ ràng trong mục tiêu của giáo dục tiếng Anh. Nghiên cứu cho thấy những tác động ngay lập tức của chính sách này đến việc dạy học, cũng như nhấn mạnh tính phức tạp trong việc thực hiện chính sách này ở Việt Nam. Qua đó, nghiên cứu góp tiếng nói vào các cuộc tranh luận đang diễn ra về cải cách giáo dục ngoại ngữ ở Việt Nam, đặc biệt là những thay đổi liên quan tới kỳ thi có tính chất quyết định ảnh hưởng đến phương pháp giảng dạy và kiểm tra đánh giá trong nền giáo dục.

Từ khóa: bài thi tiếng Anh, dạy học, kiểm tra đánh giá, tác động, trung học phổ thông

1. Introduction

English language education in Vietnam has undergone significant reforms over the past few decades, driven by its growing importance as a global language and the nation's increasing integration into international markets (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017). Among the key components of these reforms is the national upper-secondary school exam (thereafter referred to as the national exam), which included an English language paper as a high-stakes assessment that influenced both teaching practices and student outcomes. However, the national exam recently shifted the English paper from compulsory to elective status, which may lead to changes in teaching focus, assessment practices, and the perceived value of English within the education system. While some argue that this shift could reduce teaching to the test and promote more meaningful learning experiences, others fear that it may lower the motivation for both teachers and students to maintain high standards in English proficiency (Pham & Do, 2021).

This research aims to explore the perspectives of English teachers on this policy change. In fact, while research on the status shift of standardized tests has been conducted in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, these studies do not account for the unique cultural and educational contexts of Vietnam, where English proficiency is increasingly viewed as a vital skill for economic and social mobility. Unlike other East Asian countries, Vietnam's rapid integration into global markets demands a more nuanced understanding of how language policy reforms

affect both teaching practices and student outcomes. To bridge this gap, this study investigates whether teachers view the abolition of the English paper as a positive or negative development, and examines the potential impacts on their teaching and assessment practices. By addressing the following research questions, this study seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions about effective language policy in Vietnam.

1. Is the shift of the English paper from compulsory to elective status in the national upper-secondary school exam perceived as a positive or negative change by teachers?

2. According to the teachers, what could be the possible impacts of this shift on their English language teaching as well as assessment and testing practices?

2. Literature Review

The status shift of the English paper in the national exam in Vietnam presents a complex and multifaceted issue for educators, policymakers, and students. One of the central concepts in this discussion is the "washback effect," which refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning practices. Washback can be either positive or negative, depending on how closely teaching is aligned with test objectives and the nature of the exam itself (Alderson & Wall, 2005). Positive washback occurs when testing encourages beneficial teaching practices that focus on comprehensive language skills. In contrast, negative washback results when teaching becomes too narrowly focused on test preparation, often at the expense of broader educational goals.

Testing plays a significant role in shaping how English is taught, particularly in high-stakes contexts such as the national exams in Vietnam. Studies show that teachers' pedagogical practices are often influenced by test content, format, and perceived difficulty, leading to teaching that aligns closely with what is tested (Cheng, 2005). When a standardized test is removed, the washback effect could shift dramatically, creating both opportunities and challenges for educators. In Vietnam, English language education has experienced substantial changes due to the country's increasing globalization and integration into the global economy (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017). The national exam has traditionally included an English paper that serves as both a graduation requirement and a critical factor for university admission. This has led to a test-driven approach in many classrooms, with teachers focusing heavily on exam preparation rather than broader language development (Pham & Do, 2021). The emphasis on passing the English paper has significantly shaped the curriculum, instructional strategies, and even students' motivation to learn the language. Given this context, the status shift of the English paper raises questions about how teaching practices will evolve. Beyond the washback effect, this study draws on sociocultural theories of learning to explore how language acquisition is shaped by broader educational policies. This dual focus allows for a more holistic understanding of how testing policies intersect with both classroom practices and students' language development.

2.1. Positive Washback Effects of Changing the Status of the English Test

Several studies have demonstrated the potential positive washback effects that could result from removing the mandatory status of a test paper. One of the most frequently cited benefits is the increase in teaching flexibility. Without the pressure to prepare students for a specific exam, teachers can experiment with new instructional methods and adopt a more student-centered approach (Alderson & Wall, 2005). This flexibility allows for a greater focus on developing students' communicative skills, critical thinking, and problem-solving abilities, which are often neglected in exam-oriented instruction (Cheng & Curtis, 2010).

Furthermore, changing the status of the test could shift teachers' focus from narrow exam-related skills to more holistic language development. Instead of teaching students how to navigate specific test formats, educators can emphasize the practical use of English in real-world contexts (Cheng, 2005). This would align with broader educational goals, such as improving students' fluency and ability to use English in academic, professional, and social settings.

Making the English paper elective may also lead to improved classroom dynamics. Without the constant pressure of test preparation, teachers can create more interactive and engaging learning environments, which could increase student participation and motivation (Shih, 2007). Additionally, teachers may have more opportunities for professional development, as they explore diverse teaching methods that are not constrained by the rigid structure of standardized tests (Watanabe, 2004).

2.2. Negative Washback Effects of Changing the Status of the English Test

Despite the potential benefits, there are also notable risks and challenges associated with removing the mandatory status of a standardized test. One of the most significant concerns is the potential lack of clear objectives. To be specific, teachers might struggle to define learning outcomes and maintain a clear direction in their teaching (Wall, 2000). This could lead to confusion and inconsistency across schools, with teachers adopting widely different approaches to English instruction.

Another potential issue is decreased accountability. Standardized tests serve as a mechanism for holding both teachers and students accountable for educational outcomes. Without a formal exam, there is a risk that teaching quality may decline, as there is no external measure of student progress or teacher effectiveness (Cheng, 2008). This lack of accountability could lead to variability in teaching quality, as some teachers may continue to strive for excellence, while others may become complacent without the pressure of a test (Green, 2007).

Moreover, the absence of a standardized test may present challenges in measuring student progress. Standardized exams provide a clear, measurable way to assess student achievement and compare results across different regions or schools. Abolishing the English paper could make it more difficult to gauge whether students are meeting national language proficiency standards (Tsagari, 2009).

Finally, teachers may experience an increase in workload as they are tasked with developing alternative assessment methods. Creating new ways to evaluate student learning without a standardized test could be time-consuming and require additional resources (Rea-Dickins, 2004). This increased burden may reduce teachers' capacity to focus on innovative teaching strategies, thereby limiting the positive impact of the policy change.

2.3. Review of Related Studies & The Research Gap

The literature on the effects of removing the mandatory status of standardized language exams, though limited, provides important insights into how such changes might impact teachers and students. Studies in contexts such as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan have shown that when high-stakes language exams are abolished or reformed, teachers often struggle to adapt to the new instructional landscape. For instance, Cheng (2008) found that teachers in Hong Kong faced significant challenges when an English test was removed from the university entrance exam. Many teachers reported feeling uncertain about how to structure their lessons, and some expressed concerns that student motivation declined without the pressure of an exam.

Similarly, Watanabe (2004) found that while some Japanese teachers embraced the

increased freedom to design more communicative lessons after the removal of an English exam, others felt overwhelmed by the lack of guidance and accountability. These findings suggest that while the potential for positive washback exists, the successful implementation of such reforms depends heavily on how well teachers are supported through professional development and clear guidelines for curriculum design.

While there is a growing body of research on the washback effects of standardized language testing, there is a clear gap in studies focused specifically on the abolition of mandatory English exams in Vietnam. Most existing research has centered on high-stakes testing environments in other East Asian contexts, with limited attention given to how these issues manifest in Vietnam's unique educational system. Given the importance of English for Vietnam's economic and social development, and the current policy discussions surrounding the national exam, this study seeks to fill a critical gap by exploring the perspectives of Vietnamese teachers on this issue. Understanding their views is crucial for shaping future policies that promote effective English language teaching and learning.

3. Research Methods

This study employs a mixed-methods research design that integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to address the research questions. The decision to use a mixed-methods approach is grounded in the need to capture a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon from both a broad statistical perspective and in-depth qualitative insights (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The quantitative component aims to gauge the overall perception and attitudes of a large sample of teachers, while the qualitative component seeks to explore individual experiences and reflections in greater depth about a relatively underexplored topic in Vietnam as pinpointed above.

3.1. Data Collection Tools and Procedures

A questionnaire was designed as the primary tool for the quantitative component of the study. The questionnaire was developed based on the key themes reported in the literature review (Table 1), particularly focusing on the positive and negative washback effects of standardized testing on teaching, assessment, and testing practices. The questionnaire comprised closed-ended questions, with responses measured on a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," as well as a few demographic questions to capture teachers' backgrounds (Alderson & Wall, 2005). Key areas of investigation included teachers' perceptions of the policy change, its expected impact on their teaching practices, and potential shifts in their assessment strategies.

Table 1

Key Themes in the Literature Review and Questionnaires

Positive washback	Negative washback
Increased teaching flexibility	Lack of clear objectives
Enhanced focus on skills development	Decreased accountability
Improved classroom dynamics	Variability in teaching quality
Professional development opportunities	Challenges in measuring progress
Encouragement of critical thinking	Potential increase in workload

The sample for the questionnaire consisted of 990 teachers selected using convenience sampling. Participants were drawn from four provinces in Northern Vietnam: Hà Nội, Hải

Phòng, Quảng Ninh, and Bắc Ninh (Table 2). Attempts were made to encompass both urban and rural areas to ensure the study reflected diverse socioeconomic contexts (Table 3). This approach ensured that the voices of teachers working in different educational environments were captured, which is important for understanding the wider implications of the new policy across various regions.

Table 2

Participants by Locations

Location	n	%
Hà Nội	410	41.41
Bắc Ninh	234	23.63
Hải Phòng	228	23.03
Quảng Ninh	118	11.91

Table 3

Participants by Socioeconomic Areas

	n	%
Cities and urban area	396	40
Suburban area	195	19.7
Towns	193	19.5
Rural areas	185	18.7
Mountainous	18	1.8
Others	3	0.1

The questionnaires were distributed in person and in the presence of the researcher to assist the respondents with any comprehension difficulty. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their involvement in the study.

Although most of the questions aimed to collect quantitative data, the participants were invited to write a reflection on the changing status of the English exam at the end of the questionnaire. 53 qualitative responses, each ranging from 100 to nearly 300 words, were collected. These qualitative data allowed for flexibility in exploring key themes while also giving participants the opportunity to introduce new perspectives that may not have been captured by the questionnaire (Kvale, 2007).

3.2. Data Analysis Tools and Procedures

The quantitative data collected from the questionnaires were analyzed using statistical methods to identify trends and patterns in teachers' perceptions. Descriptive statistics, such as mean scores and standard deviations, were calculated for each of the key themes, providing a clear picture of the general sentiment among the participants (Field, 2013). Inferential statistics, such as t-tests and ANOVA, were employed to examine whether there were statistically significant differences in perceptions based on factors such as the teachers' location (urban versus rural). The analysis aimed to answer the research questions by providing a quantitative understanding of whether the shifted status of the English paper was perceived positively or negatively and how teachers anticipated it would affect their teaching and assessment practices.

The qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This approach was chosen because it allows for the

identification of recurring themes within the data while also being flexible enough to accommodate the emergence of new themes. The analysis followed six key phases: familiarization with the data, coding, generating initial themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report.

The findings from the qualitative analysis were used to contextualize the quantitative results, providing a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the study's central research questions. Through this mixed-methods approach, the study not only captures the overall trends in teachers' perceptions but also provides detailed insights into the personal experiences and challenges faced by teachers in light of this policy change.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Teachers' Overall Perceptions of the Changing Status of the English Paper in the National Exam

When the teachers were asked to rate the overall impact of the removal of mandatory status of the English paper on a scale of 1 (very negative) to 10 (very positive), their responses produced a mean score of 4.47, with a median of 5.0, indicating a slightly negative view on average. The higher variability ($SD=2.25$) suggests a polarized perception among teachers, reflecting a significant range of opinions on whether the policy change will enhance or detract from their teaching and assessment practice. The ANOVA results indicate that teachers' perceptions of the impact of removing English as a mandatory exam subject differ significantly across various regions ($F=2.52$, $p=.02$). Teachers in urban areas, whether in central city locations or peripheral areas, rated the impact around 4.5 on a 10-point scale. This suggests a moderately neutral view, implying they do not foresee major changes to their teaching and assessment practices. Teachers in rural and mountainous regions, however, rated the impact at 5.0, reflecting a more neutral to positive stance. The data thus suggest that teachers in rural areas seemed to view the status shift of the English paper in a more positive light than those from urban areas.

To delve into these quantitative results, qualitative data reveals two broad themes about the short-term and long-term impacts of this policy change as delineated below.

4.1.1. Short-Term Impact: Concerns About Student Engagement and Retention

This theme, mentioned by 24 out of 53 qualitative responses, reflects a prevalent worry among educators regarding the potential for decreased student motivation and commitment when the compulsory English paper is removed. Educators frequently articulated the view that exams play a central role in sustaining students' interest and involvement in English learning.

Two subthemes emerged within this category. First, 15 respondents voiced concerns about *poorer student motivation* in the absence of exams. For example, one teacher remarked, "Without compulsory exams, students will no longer be motivated to learn English. They will have no reason to try if there is nothing to be tested on". Another educator highlighted similar sentiments, noting, "Students will lose their seriousness in studying. Exams are a way to remind them that English is an important subject". These responses suggest that educators view exams as not only evaluative but also essential for encouraging sustained engagement. This is consistent with the intrinsic motivation theories of Ryan and Deci (2000), which suggest that external evaluations like exams can be powerful motivators in educational settings. Similarly, research by Harlen and Deakin Crick (2003) supports the view that standardized exams maintain a level of student engagement that might otherwise wane, as exams serve as both a

behavioral anchor and a reinforcement of subject importance.

Another subtheme is the negative impact on *discipline and consistency* as nine educators perceived exams as necessary for promoting disciplined study habits among students. As one respondent pointed out, “Removing (the compulsory) exam is like opening the door for students to neglect the subject. Exams help maintain discipline and guide their learning”. Similarly, another educator expressed, “Without exams, students will become lazy and just study superficially. Exams create motivation for them to keep trying”. These quotations underscore the belief that exams provide structure that helps students stay focused and disciplined over time.

4.1.2. Long-Term Impact: Concerns About Continued English Education

Concerns about the long-term impacts of disrupted continuous education was cited by 18 respondents, indicating a strong belief in the importance of formal English education for students' future opportunities. One teacher stated, “English is necessary for the students' future, especially in this era of globalization. Removing (the compulsory) English exams will be a step back”. Another respondent expanded on this, saying, “English skills are not only a part of education but also the foundation for career development. Without exams, students will not have the motivation to study seriously”. These quotes highlight a common view among educators that English is integral to students' academic and professional success. Some educators linked exams directly to students' future prospects, particularly in higher education and employment. Two teachers went as far as to stress that “Without English exams, students will lose the opportunity to study and work in international environments. Exams are a way to prepare them for a broader future” and “Taking English exams opens the door to students' future. Removing (the compulsory) exam is like closing that door”. These sentiments are reflected in the work of Graddol (2006), who argues that English skills are foundational in a global economy and that standardized testing plays a role in ensuring those skills are adequately cultivated. Furthermore, Lee and Shouse (2011) discuss how standardized exams can serve as a social equalizer, giving students from diverse backgrounds a common framework through which to demonstrate proficiency, thus providing them with wider educational and career prospects.

This thematic analysis of 53 qualitative responses from educators highlights their diverse and strongly held views on the potential impacts of removing the mandatory status of the standardized English paper. Concerns about student engagement, the importance of English as a core subject, financial considerations, and educational quality reflect a complex interplay of practical and philosophical perspectives. Educators express worries that changing the status of the English paper could diminish motivation, compromise educational quality, and hinder students' future prospects. These insights contribute to the literature on educational policy impacts, offering a granular view of the specific challenges and considerations that educators face in a rapidly evolving educational landscape.

4.2. The Impacts of the Changing Status of the English Paper on Teaching, Testing and Assessment Practices

To provide further insights into the overall impacts of this policy change, a series of questions rated from 1 to 5 explored specific impacts of removing the status of English as a required paper on themes such as teaching flexibility, classroom atmosphere, professional development, and assessment (see Table 1). Teachers generally provided neutral responses across most categories, with mean scores ranging from 2.81 to 3.01 (Table 4). The following key findings emerged:

Table 4*Teachers' Ratings on Possible Impacts of the Removal of the English Paper*

On a scale from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree), how much do you agree that the removal of the compulsory status of the English exam in the high school graduation exam will:	M	SD
Encourage flexibility and creativity in teaching methods and assessment?	2.80	1.12
Increase the development of practical English skills for students?	3.01	1.11
Enhance the development of soft skills for students?	3	1.1
Make the classroom atmosphere become more dynamic and positive?	2.82	1.11
Make the teaching and assessment objectives become more vague?	2.84	1.12
Create more opportunities for professional development?	2.96	1.09
Make the assessment of the quality of teaching and learning more challenging?	3.05	1.06
Make teaching and assessment become less consistent as each teacher may have their own direction and methods?	3.19	1.02
Increased pressure and workload for teachers in designing teaching activities?	3.02	1.04
Increase pressure and workload for teachers in designing assessment activities?	3.05	1.06

Innovation and flexibility: With a mean of 2.81, teachers tended to disagree or remain neutral about the notion that the policy change fosters creativity and flexibility. This is reflected in the moderate variability ($SD=1.13$), indicating some diversity of opinion. Some teachers elaborated on this finding, highlighting the limitations in terms of resources and policies:

As a teacher, I feel less pressure when (the compulsory) English exams are removed, but I worry that students will lose motivation. It feels difficult to encourage creativity without specific guidance on how to adjust teaching methods to fit the new policy.

Removing the mandatory status of the exams does not mean that teaching will become more flexible. Many teachers will stick to old methods because they lack the tools and support to be creative in their teaching.

Removing the mandatory status of the exams reduces stress, but I think creativity in teaching is still limited by curriculum requirements. There isn't much room to try new methods without more significant changes from the school and the education department.

Overall, this perspective aligns with Nguyen and Pham (2019), who observed that removing standard exams often fails to immediately foster creativity, as educators may adhere to traditional methods due to lack of training or resources.

Enhanced practical and soft skills development: Neutral mean scores (3.01 and 3.00, respectively) suggest teachers do not anticipate significant shifts in practical language skills or soft skills development due to the policy change. The relatively low standard deviations (1.11 and 1.10) reflect a level of consensus among respondents. To shed light on this finding, some teachers elaborated:

I still want to include English as a compulsory exam because students will lose an important part of their motivation without it. Exams not only assess knowledge but also help students develop practical skills, like reading comprehension and writing skills, which will be overlooked without exams.

Removing the (compulsory) exam does not really result in a shift in soft skills development. Only when teachers are given new teaching methods and students have clear goals can we improve these skills.

Changing the status of the English exams may reduce students' focus on developing

communication skills. They will no longer value the subject and, as a result, will pay less attention to using the language in practical situations. This will make language learning more superficial.

Similarly, these responses highlight the synergy between English teaching and certain soft skill development, which could be undermined by the changing status of the English exam. Besides, the lack of support could also cast doubt on this possibility. This result is consistent with Tran (2018), who found that the absence of exams alone does not automatically shift classroom focus but can provide room for varied teaching approaches if effectively supported by school administration.

Classroom dynamics: Teachers expressed a slight disagreement ($m=2.82$) on the idea that classrooms would become more dynamic and engaging due to reduced test pressures, with a similar standard deviation of 1.11 indicating moderate spread in views. Many teachers explained why they were less optimistic about the dynamics in their classes in the future by underlining the lack of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn English:

Students no longer see English as an important subject when there is no exam, and this makes the classroom more passive. In the past, students paid more attention because there was an exam, but now they only focus on other subjects and are not interested in English.

The classroom will no longer be lively if (the compulsory) English exams are removed. Students will focus on other subjects and participate less in the learning activities of this subject, leading to a less dynamic atmosphere, and interaction between students and teachers will decrease.

I have seen a noticeable change in the classroom when some subjects no longer have exams. Students seem to lose motivation to learn, which affects the dynamism and engagement in class. If we continue removing (compulsory) exams in English, I worry that the classroom will become even more dull.

In contrast, Lee and Kim (2020) reported that removing high-stakes exams in other subjects has led to more dynamic classrooms, suggesting that factors unique to English instruction might moderate such benefits.

Professional development: A mean score of 2.84 reflects a perception that opportunities for professional development might not significantly improve. This sentiment is consistent across respondents ($SD=1.12$), and echoed in the following elaborations from certain respondents:

Removing (compulsory) exams could create opportunities for teachers to innovate teaching methods, but only if we receive appropriate professional training. Many teachers are still struggling to adapt to the changes without adequate support.

I am trying to change my teaching approach to align with the new policy, but I feel there is a lack of professional development support from the school. Without proper training courses, it will be very difficult to apply new teaching methods.

Not having (compulsory) exams might reduce pressure for teachers, but it requires us to learn and develop new teaching skills. I hope the school will offer more training courses to support this process.

It is clear that the respondents above relied on the school support for professional development, without which it would be impossible for any remarkable changes. This finding well aligns with Phan (2021), who reported that teachers often feel constrained in their ability to pursue new instructional methods when faced with curriculum changes that are not accompanied by professional development opportunities.

Workload and assessment challenges: The analysis revealed that teachers were

generally neutral to slightly disagreeing on whether the policy change would increase their workload for lesson planning and assessment tasks. Both columns showed similar patterns with means of 2.84 and standard deviations around 1.12, indicating some variation in individual experiences and expectations. Reflecting this uncertainty, these responses similarly refer to the replacement of traditional forms of workload and assessment rather than the reduction of pressure on the teachers.

Removing (compulsory) exams does not reduce teachers' workload. We have to assess each student based on more criteria, which increases the burden in preparing lessons and evaluating student performance.

Not having (compulsory) exams might reduce the pressure of testing, but at the same time, teachers will have to design more assessment activities, which requires more time and effort. The workload does not really decrease but just shifts in form.

Removing (compulsory) exams is not just about reducing the workload for teachers. We have to find other ways to monitor students' progress, which requires more time, and the workload will actually increase.

Overall, this finding is in line with Nguyen (2020), who highlighted that while removing exams can reduce certain pressures, it can also increase the need for individualized assessment, thus redistributing rather than reducing overall workload.

In summary, the findings above suggest that teachers' attitudes towards the policy change were generally neutral or slightly negative, particularly concerning classroom dynamics and perceived benefits for professional growth. High variability in responses for general interest and ease of teaching indicates a broad range of experiences, suggesting that while some teachers may feel optimistic, others were less certain of positive outcomes. This ambivalence could stem from concerns about diminished focus on English, with implications for maintaining a cohesive curriculum and consistent teaching standards. Overall, these results provide valuable insights into the nuanced perspectives of educators as they navigate policy changes in language education. The analysis suggests that while some teachers may see potential benefits in terms of teaching flexibility, others may feel that the policy change introduces new challenges, particularly around the assessment and workload. Future research could further explore these themes to understand the long-term effects of such policy shifts on teaching practices and student outcomes.

5. Conclusion

This study provides a detailed exploration of teachers' perceptions regarding the removal of the mandatory status of the English paper in Vietnam's national exam. The findings reveal mixed receptions from the teachers: while some teachers appreciated the potential for increased flexibility and innovation in teaching methods, many expressed concerns about the possible decline in student motivation and the overall focus on English proficiency. The mixed-methods approach effectively captures the varied experiences of teachers from diverse regions, highlighting the importance of contextual factors such as geographic location and educational resources.

This study offers a significant contribution to the body of literature on the effects of high-stakes exam policies on teaching and assessment, particularly in the under-researched context of Vietnam. The research fills a crucial gap by providing empirical insights into how the removal of the compulsory English paper from the national exam affects English language teaching practices. Prior research on washback effects has largely focused on the presence of

standardized testing, yet this study uniquely examines the consequences of removing the mandatory status of such a test, thereby addressing a critical and often overlooked dimension of educational reform.

The paper's findings contribute to the ongoing debate on the role of standardized testing in shaping teaching practices. By showing that teachers remain divided on the potential benefits of the reform, the study underscores the complexity of washback effects, which are neither uniformly positive nor negative. It highlights that while the removal of the compulsory exam might offer opportunities for more flexible, communicative approaches to teaching, many teachers remain concerned about the lack of accountability and motivation that standardized exams provide. This nuanced perspective enriches the understanding of washback in a way that transcends the binary of "positive" versus "negative" washback, suggesting that the impact of exam removal is highly context-dependent and influenced by factors such as regional disparities and access to professional development.

Moreover, the study contributes to the broader conversation on educational policy reform in East Asia, where high-stakes exams have traditionally been seen as cornerstones of academic success. While previous research from contexts like Japan, South Korea, and Hong Kong has demonstrated similar tensions between the rigidity of exams and the need for more holistic educational approaches, this paper uniquely captures the Vietnamese perspective, where English is increasingly viewed as vital to the country's integration into the global economy. In doing so, it provides important policy implications: it emphasizes the need for careful implementation of such reforms, ensuring that teachers are supported with clear guidelines, professional development, and resources that enable them to adapt their teaching practices effectively.

A significant limitation of this study is its cross-sectional nature, which captures only the immediate reactions of teachers to the policy change. The long-term impacts on teaching quality, student engagement, and English proficiency remain unclear and require further longitudinal research. Additionally, while this study provides rich insights from a large and diverse sample of teachers across different regions, it does not directly capture students' perspectives, which are crucial to understanding the full impact of the policy change. Future studies should explore the student dimension and consider how changes in teaching practices affect learning outcomes over time. As for now, to mitigate the potential negative effects of this policy change, the Ministry of Education should develop a comprehensive professional development program that equips teachers with alternative assessment strategies to provide a more holistic measure of student progress while maintaining accountability.

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