

## **SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENT IN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN UZBEKISTAN**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article examines the role and impact of standards-based assessment and standardized language tests in Uzbekistan, particularly regarding CEFR implementation and gatekeeping functions in educational and employment contexts. It argues that the widespread use of these tests may lead to negative washback on language teaching and learning, impacting teachers and students' perspectives. Ethical concerns are also raised about standardized testing's power and control, suggesting a need for democratic assessment practices. The study calls for a more balanced approach to testing that promotes learning improvements while respecting democratic values.*

**Keywords:** *standardized testing, language proficiency, CEFR standards, Uzbekistan education, language assessment, EFL teachers, gatekeeping, educational policy, test washback, ethical concerns.*

## **O‘ZBEKISTONDA TIL O‘QITISHDA STANDARTLANGAN BAHOLASHNING IJTIMOIIY O‘LCHAMLARI**

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### **ANNOTATSIYA**

*Ushbu maqola O‘zbekistonda CEFRni joriy etish va ta‘lim hamda ishga qabul qilish jarayonlarida standartlarga asoslangan baholash va standartlashtirilgan til testlarining roli va ta‘sirini o‘rganadi. Ushbu testlarning keng qo‘llanilishi til o‘qitish va o‘rganishda salbiy ta‘sir ko‘rsatishi mumkinligi va bu o‘qituvchilar hamda talabalarning qarashlariga ta‘sir qilishi mumkinligi ta‘kidlanadi. Shuningdek, standartlashtirilgan testlarning kuch va nazorat funksiyalari bo‘yicha axloqiy (e‘tik) xavotirlar (jixatlar) keltiriladi va demokratik baholash amaliyotlariga ehtiyoj borligi taklif qilinadi. Tadqiqot testlashning yanada muvozanatli yondashuvini taklif qiladi,*

*bunda ta'limni rivojlantirish demokratik qadriyatlarni hurmat qilgan holda qo'llab-quvvatlanishi kerak.*

***Kalit so'zlar:** standartlashtirilgan testlash, til malakasi, CEFR standartlari, O'zbekiston ta'limi, tilni baholash, EFL o'qituvchilari, kirish-chiqish nazorati, ta'lim siyosati, test ta'siri, e'tik qarashlar.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

In our modern age tests, especially high stakes, deeply influence people's lives in many ways. They can even be one of the most important milestones in individuals' academic lives to shape their future careers. Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) point out the increasing role of standards-based assessment and standardized tests in assessing language abilities in a global scale. They also claim that standardized measures have been chosen by authorities, educational institutions, schools, businesses as economical, reliable, and valid assessment forms for the candidates to enter, continue in, and exit those institutions. In many countries, standardized language tests such as IELTS (International English Language System), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), FCE (Cambridge Assessment English) are used to make decisions on assessing language abilities of individuals for certain purposes and suitability which can be sufficient for the gatekeeping functions (Hudson, 2013; Spolsky, 1997). In other words, such proficiency tests based on certain standards can play a role of admitting or rejecting people from one level of education to the other, providing or depriving them of employment.

In Uzbekistan, with the introduction of CEFR (Common European Framework of References) standards in education since 2013, the role of using standardized language tests for social and educational purposes such as gatekeeping has been increasing for the last decade. Personally, I am interested in this area because the implementation of CEFR standards and the use of standardized test results for gatekeeping purposes are closely connected to my job as an EFL teacher. As an EFL teacher in Uzbekistan I am required to take a language proficiency test and obtain at least the level C1 on the CEFR scale or any standardized language test result which is equivalent to CEFR level of C1 if I want to retain my job or to join an educational setting as an EFL teacher. While policy makers claim that the implementation of CEFR standards in Uzbekistani education system and the introduction of standardized language test use connecting with CEFR standards for gatekeeping purposes can bring many benefits to develop foreign language teaching, learning and assessment in Uzbekistan (Tolibjonov et al, 2020), some researchers assert that there are some challenging issues in standards-based assessment and standardized tests that stakeholders face (Brown and Abeywickrama, 2010; Khatamova, 2018).

In this article I will argue that the large-scale use of standards-based assessment based on CEFR standards and several standardized tests used in Uzbekistani context as gatekeeping functions might have negative washback on teaching and learning languages in Uzbekistan from teachers' perspective. I will also discuss ethical issues of the standardized language tests used in the higher educational context of Uzbekistan arguing why the role of democratic assessment is important in this context.

### **Standards-based assessment and standardized tests**

Testing people whether they have certain abilities and qualifications has a long history. Cheng (2008) points out one of the earliest formal tests and examinations used almost 2000 years ago in the Han Dynasty of China. These tests were used to choose the highest government officials for certain qualities in the country. Brown (2004) highlights even earlier instance of the use of “shibboleth test” which was utilized to distinguish two linguistically and ethnically different groups of people. Today, our lives are still greatly influenced by tests, especially standardized tests which are high-stakes. Hudson (2013) points out the importance of standards-based testing and assessment as “standards serve to outline expectation and to encourage consistency” (p. 479). In many education systems decisions are made based on standards. Teachers and educators use standards to find out success or failure in the use of standards (Menken, Hudson & Leung, 2014). To define standards-based assessment, it is important to understand what standards or benchmarks are, which we call framework of reference as well. After all, standards-based assessment is “measures that are used to evaluate student academic achievement and show that students have reached certain performance levels or standards” (Brown and Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 86). Different institutions have generated language standards for multiple purposes. Standards come from transnational organizations, government agencies, state department of education, educational organizations. In Uzbekistani context, we will be speaking about CEFR standards (Council of Europe, 2001) which the country adopted in the education system in 2013 in accordance with the Presidential Decree № 1875 “The measures of strengthening the system of learning foreign languages” (2012) and the standardized tests which are being used as gatekeeping in Uzbekistan after the definition of standardized tests is given below paragraphs.

### **Standardized tests**

Language tests are commonly used for educational purposes by different institutions all around the world. Thus, we can differentiate high-stakes and low-stakes tests. Low-stake tests usually do not have strong impact on stakeholders while

high-stakes tests influence stakeholders and their lives significantly. Most standardized tests are high-stakes and perform gatekeeping functions. “A standardized test, among other things, presupposes certain standard objectives or performance levels – now better known as standards that are held constant across one form of test to another” (Brown and Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 86). Researchers highlight four characteristics of standardized tests as follow: standards-based, product of research and development, systematic scoring and administration procedures, norm referenced. Many proficiency tests such as International English Language System (IELTS), Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) which are commercially produced are norm-referenced and considered to be a solid example of standardizes tests. These types of tests are widely used for gatekeeping purposes for university admissions and accepting candidates for a post in workplaces. In Uzbekistani education context CEFR standards and standardized tests are commonly used for those purposes mentioned above.

### **The role of CEFR standards and standardized tests in Uzbekistan**

From the first days of Independence in 1991, Uzbekistan started to pursue the movement of standards-based instruction and assessment. In 1997, Uzbekistan introduced the National Program of Training Specialists, which required State Education Standards to set achievement targets for each subject and assess student achievement. Teaching foreign languages and assessing language ability were the first fields to be developed. However, the biggest, probably the most important, step in the country to develop foreign language teaching, learning and assessment for the standards-based instruction and assessment movement was Presidential Decree № 1875 which was adopted on 10<sup>th</sup> of December, 2012. This document defined a completely new direction of learning foreign languages and assessing language skills. According to the Decree, foreign language learning and assessment should be carried out in accordance with international standards (Musoeva, 2020). As a result, the Common European Framework of References for Languages (European Council, 2001) standards have become the main guidelines for language teaching, learning and testing in Uzbekistan. Now teachers are required to show that test results should provide information about the standard in relation to the CEFR, and the curriculum should be aligned to CEFR standards. As we know the CEFR is not tied to any specific language, however, most standardized language tests provide CEFR equivalents. In Uzbekistan, the gatekeeping role of standardized tests has increased since the CEFR was adopted as the main guideline for foreign language assessment. According to paragraph 2 of the decision No. 312 of May 19, 2021 of the Cabinet of Ministers “On measures to effectively organize the popularization of foreign

language learning”, from the 2022/2023 academic year, applicants who are newly recruited for the positions of foreign language teachers in state educational institutions at least B2 level, according to the third paragraph, until the 2022/2023 academic year, all foreign language teachers working in state higher education institutions should have at least C1 level national or equivalent international certificate. According to this decision, based on Article 100 of the Labour Code (1995): “changes in production and labour organization”, the termination of employment contracts with teachers who have not submitted the appropriate language certificate during the given notice period has been appointed. EFL teachers are not the only stakeholders affected by such power of gatekeeping purpose of standardized tests in Uzbekistani educational context. In accordance with the Presidential Decree of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated May 19, 2021 “On measures to take the activities of popularizing the study of foreign languages in the Republic of Uzbekistan to a new level in terms of quality” PQ 5117, candidates who are applying for postgraduate programs (master and doctoral levels) are required to show a certificate of foreign language proficiency which must be at least B2 level of CEFR or equivalent of CEFR level B2. Starting from the 2023/2024 academic year, the participation of persons with a national or international certificate of the corresponding level will be introduced in competitions for master’s degrees and post-higher (doctoral) education specialties of higher education institutions. In this case, a national or equivalent international certificate of at least C1 level is required for philological fields, and a national or equivalent international certificate of B2 level for non-philological fields. However, such powerful use of standardized tests as gatekeeping has sparked a debate among main stakeholders in terms of validity and washback of standardized language tests used and the ethicality of those very tests.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, while the adoption of CEFR standards and standardized language tests in Uzbekistan has aimed to raise the quality of language education and align assessment with international benchmarks, its implementation presents significant challenges. The role of these tests as gatekeeping tools in educational and employment contexts has influenced teachers’ and students’ experiences in profound ways, often leading to a focus on test preparation rather than holistic language learning. Such an approach can result in negative washback, where the pressure to meet test criteria undermines the overall language learning process. Moreover, the high-stakes nature of these assessments raises ethical concerns. Standardized tests wield significant control, impacting the livelihoods and career progression of individuals, especially teachers who face employment consequences based on their

test results. This authority may be seen as a form of control over teachers and students, potentially limiting their academic freedom and diminishing the broader objectives of language education. Therefore, the study calls for a more balanced approach that combines standardized assessments with formative, democratic evaluation methods. Such practices could mitigate the risks of test-centered learning while respecting individual learning needs and promoting skill development. By fostering a system where standardized tests are one of many tools rather than the sole gatekeepers, Uzbekistan can ensure that its educational practices support both academic excellence and ethical standards, ultimately creating a more supportive environment for language learners and educators alike.

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