

## **POWER OF TESTS: STANDARDIZED TESTS AND THEIR IMPACT ON EDUCATION IN UZBEKISTAN**

**Asrorov Ilgor**

International Islamic Academy of Uzbekistan

[i.asrorov@iiiau.uz](mailto:i.asrorov@iiiau.uz)

### **ABSTRACT**

*This article explores the power and influence of standardized language tests, particularly in the context of Uzbekistan's educational system. It examines how tests, especially those aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), act as gatekeeping mechanisms that shape educational outcomes and social mobility. Drawing on the work of scholars like Foucault (1979) and Shohamy (2001), the article highlights the ethical concerns surrounding the use of tests as tools of control and surveillance. It discusses the negative impacts of these tests on teaching, learning, and individuals, urging for more democratic testing practices that prioritize educational equity and integrity.*

**Keywords:** *Standardized tests, education, power, CEFR, gatekeeping, washback, ethics, Uzbekistan*

## **TESTLARNING KUCHI: STANDARTLASHTIRILGAN TESTLAR VA ULARNING O'ZBEKISTON TA'LIMIGA TA'SIRI**

**Asrorov Ilg'or**

O'zbekiston xalqaro islom akademiyasi

[i.asrorov@iiiau.uz](mailto:i.asrorov@iiiau.uz)

### **ANNOTATSIYA**

*Ushbu maqola, O'zbekiston ta'lim tizimida, standartlashtirilgan til testlarining kuchi va ta'sirini o'rganadi. Xususan, CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) bilan moslashtirilgan testlarning ta'lim natijalarini va ijtimoiy harakatlanishni shakllantiruvchi "gatekeeping" mexanizmlari sifatida qanday rol o'ynashini tahlil qiladi. Fukolt (1979) va Shohamy (2001) kabi olimlarning ishlari asosida maqola, testlarning nazorat va kuzatuv vositalari sifatida ishlatilishining axloqiy muammolarini yoritadi. Ushbu testlarning o'qitish, o'rganish va shaxslar hayotiga salbiy ta'sirini muhokama qilib, ta'limda tenglik va adolatni ustun qo'yadigan demokratiyaga asoslangan test amaliyotlariga chaqiradi.*

**Kalit so'zlar:** *standartlashtirilgan testlar, ta'lim, testlarning kuchi, CEFR, gatekeeping, washback, axloq (ethics), O'zbekiston*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The power and influence of standardized tests in educational systems is a topic of growing concern and debate, particularly regarding their role in shaping individual lives and broader societal structures. Tests, once viewed primarily as tools for assessment, have increasingly become instruments of control and surveillance, affecting not only the test takers but also teachers, policymakers, and educational institutions. In this context, tests are often used to determine educational outcomes and career opportunities, making them key players in decisions that impact social mobility and access to resources. Scholars such as Foucault (1979) and Shohamy (2001) have highlighted the ways in which tests serve as mechanisms of power, shaping behavior and expectations within educational systems. These effects are particularly visible in high-stakes testing environments, where test outcomes influence admission to universities, job placements, and even professional certifications. This article examines the use of standardized language tests in the educational system of Uzbekistan, where such tests, particularly those aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), are employed for gatekeeping purposes. It explores the potential negative impacts and washback effects these tests can have on teaching, learning, and the overall educational experience. The paper argues for a more democratic approach to testing that considers the ethical implications of using tests as instruments of power and control.

### **Power of tests**

Tests are powerful devices and they are capable of dictating many decisions. In language testing, for example, we may collect evidence based on which make decisions and inferences. These decisions or inferences have profound implications for individuals and the society, which means tests have undeniable power highlighted by many researchers. Spolsky (1997) points out that so-called “Shibboleth test” in the Bible was used for control and power in order to recognize outsiders. In modern times, the power of tests in our lives is being felt even more. Foucault (1979) argues that “test is an act of surveillance by the educational system” (p. 184). He also points out that educational systems develop tests because they want to observe students and “it is a normalizing gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to quantify, classify and punish” (Foucault, 1979, p.184). According to Shohamy (2001), traditional testing pays much attention to the quality of tests in order to maximize accuracy of tests. However, the testing experience of test takers is given very little attention. Shohamy (2001) also claims that the evidence of power that tests have can be observed if we listen to the voices of test takers. At the same time, authorities are using tests as disciplinary tools and this leads test takers to fear tests and obey the

rules those authorities put with the help of tests. Madus (1990) states that a single test performance can often indicate the future of individuals and “a single standardized test score independently triggers as an automatic admission, promotion, placement or graduation decision” (p.5). Because of their power and authority, tests can be used as an effective tool to control educational systems and prescribe the behaviour of individuals who are affected by the results. In a variety of contexts, this issue can be observed. Policymakers who are aware of such power of them use tests to manipulate systems of education and curricula. At school levels, tests can be used to urge teachers to teach and tests can also be used to force students to focus on their studies. Tests can serve to enforce student learning and teachers can use them to motivate learning and introduce discipline. As a result, tests which are designed to find out achievements or select suitable individuals for a certain job have turn into controlling and manipulating devices over educational systems. Shohamy (1991) asserts that countries with centralized educational systems commonly practice tests for power and control because central agencies usually control the curriculum in those countries. Tests can be seen as the primary tools to introduce changes in the system of education without changing other components such as curricula or teacher training. In Uzbekistan, for example, “when the CEFR was introduced in 2013, there were different concerns by the Ministry of Education and foreign language teachers on how to implement it smoothly in the education system. Almost all teachers took and are still taking exams based on tests to the CEFR proficiency levels called National System of Assessment of Foreign Language Proficiency for certification” (Musoeva, 2020, p. 388). The number of tests which are used for such purposes by policy makers in Uzbekistani context has been increased to 16 including both standardized tests and other types of certificate of achievement (for the full list of language certificates, see **Appendix A**). However, the variety of tests in this list caused the debate among stakeholders on the validity issues, particularly consequential validity (or known as impact), in the next section. In language testing the consequences of tests were present in even ancient “Shibboleth tests” we mentioned above, however, the awareness of this power of language tests was introduced in the previous century with Messick’s concept of validity. Researchers started studying the impact of language testing on individuals, which we to it as consequential validity as well.

Test impact is observed in different levels from micro to macro. This clearly suggests that tests have might have impact on students, teachers, schools, parents, making policy, instructions, social mobility. In Uzbekistani educational context, stakeholders, especially, teachers are concerned about the detrimental effects of standardized language tests which are serving as gatekeeping on the life of

individuals. Choi (2008) argued that the use of standardized tests for gatekeeping purposes may prevent students from opportunities to gain productive language skills because test takers can be disillusioned with testing. Another aspect of impact that have caused teachers' concern is standardized test industry. Test takers are willingly ready to pay high prices to pass such tests no matter how expensive these tests are because the power of these tests as gatekeeping urge them to do so. McNamara (2000) criticizes the effects of opportunities for test preparation on test results. He argues that test takers who have coaching opportunities thanks to their financial affordability might have impact on performance.

### **Washback issues related to standardized tests**

Another instance of impact (consequential validity) is a range of effects of testing on teaching and learning which is known as washback in the language assessment. Messick (1996) claims that washback may serve for both promotion and inhibition of learning. Thus, beneficial washback and negative washback are differentiated by scholars and researchers. In Uzbekistani context, teachers are concerned the effects of standardized tests on language learning and instructions. For example, students who are preparing for a test usually think about the preparation phase rather than language development. The main aim of the students can be just passing the required level of a standardized language test or taking as highest level as possible since a good result they take from a standardized test may bring them a lot of opportunity. Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) criticize the modern use of standardized tests which serve as gatekeeping and claim that those standardized language tests “can lead students to focus on simply gaining an acceptable score rather than on language development” (p. 38). Another concern about the effect of standardized tests on learning in Uzbekistani context is the summative character of standardized language tests used in this educational context. It is claimed that, compared to other formative assessment forms, standardized tests “do not need to offer much in the way of washback” (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 39) because a simple numerical (for example IELTS band 6.5) or letter (for example B+) score usually do not provide beneficial washback. However, stakeholders, especially teachers, are optimistic about the positive effects of tests on instructions, learning, and teaching and looking for ways of how to achieve beneficial washback.

### **Ethical issues in a testing context**

It is commonly believed that testing industry is growing rapidly and almost everyone is subject to tests at least once in their life. The issue of using tests as a means of abuse of power by authorities is another topic among scholars which is being widely discussed today. The use of standardized tests by policy makers has also

become an ethical issue that many researchers and stakeholders pay attention. Medina and Neill (1990) claim that the complexity issue of testing issues has been ignored by many policymakers and there are obvious limitations of standardized test use we should deal with. In Uzbekistan, teachers are also against of standardized test use as gatekeeping on the grounds of absence of democratic principles. From my experience, many teachers believe that the requirement of standardized test result equivalent to C1 level of CEFR for placing EFL teachers at workplaces is violating democratic principles. They claim that such tests should not be the mechanism of enforcing control and power by government and businesses as Shohamy (2001) claims that

“The uses of tests as instrument of power violate fundamental values and principles of democratic practices. The power of tests are in the hands of powerful organizations that control and define knowledge in their own terms, often without any form of consultation with pedagogical experts and negating existing knowledge as expressed in curricula. Tests are often used as ideologies in the belief that their introduction will upgrade learning, although there is no evidence that this in fact occurs.” (p. 375).

The introduction of CEFR standards and standardized language tests in Uzbekistani education context aims that very reason of improving foreign language learning mentioned above according to Presidential Decree №.1875 “On the measures of strengthening the system of learning foreign languages” (2012). Although the aim of using standardized language tests in Uzbekistani context is defined as developing foreign language learning, teaching and assessment, we should not forget that “the large-scale standardized testing is not an unbiased process” (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010, p. 99) but it can shape the lives of individuals as the agent of political and ideological agendas. Thus, individuals, especially teachers and students affected from high-stakes tests in Uzbekistani context, are in favor of and expecting a number of principles under the notion of critical language testing should be observed in order to have more democratic testing practices such as limiting the tests as a tool of power, transferring power from elites to locals, making test creators responsible for the consequences of tests (Shohamy, 2001).

### **Conclusion**

As we discussed above high-stakes tests have been widely used to make decisions in educational systems and their impact on test takers can be significant. In Uzbekistani educational context like many others, policymakers declare that they use certain standardized language tests for gatekeeping in the selection of suitable candidates for university admissions and EFL teachers linking the tests CEFR standards but the role of the tests does not end in the examination and certification



process. All the stakeholders should be aware of the impact and washback of the tests on teaching and learning. Tests should not only be the way of imposing policies but they should serve the improvement of teaching and learning system as declared in policy documents (Shohamy, 1993). In this essay, I have tried to argue that certain standardized language tests used in Uzbekistani context might have negative impact and washback on teaching and learning and emphasize the role of democratic assessment as alternative since such using such tests as power might violate the democratic principles of assessment (Shohamy, 2001) as ethics of testing should not be ignored in testing process.

### REFERENCES

1. Brown, H. D., & Abeywickrama, P. (2010). Language assessment. *Principles and Classroom Practices*. White Plains, NY: Pearson Education.
2. Choi, I. C. (2008). The impact of EFL testing on EFL education in Korea. *Language testing*, 25(1), 39-62.
3. Council of Europe. (2001). *The Common European Framework of References for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
4. Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline and punish*. New York: Vintage Books.
5. Labour Code. (1995). *The Labour Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan*. <https://lex.uz/docs/-142859>
6. Madaus, G. F. (1990). *Testing as a social technology*. Boston College.
7. Menken, K., Hudson, T., & Leung, C. (2014). Symposium: Language Assessment in Standards-Based Education Reform. *TESOL Quarterly*, 48(3), 586–614. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43267981>
8. Messick, S. (1996). Validity and washback in language testing. *Language Testing*, 13(3): 241-56.
9. Musoeva, A. (2020). Teacher professional development and its link with the CEFR. *Digital technologies in modern education: current trends and development factors in philology and pedagogy*. Tashkent.
10. Presidential Decree №.1875 “*On the measures of strengthening the system of learning foreign languages*” (December 10, 2012). <https://lex.uz/docs/2126032>
11. Spolsky, B. (1997). The ethics of gatekeeping tests: what have we learned in a hundred years? *Language Testing*, 14(3), 242–247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026553229701400302>
12. Shohamy, E. (1993). *The Power of Tests: The Impact of Language Tests on Teaching and Learning*. NFLC Occasional Papers.

13. Shohamy, E. (2001). Democratic assessment as an alternative. *Language testing*, 18(4), 373-391.
14. Shohamy, E. G. (2001). *The power of tests: A critical perspective on the uses of language tests*. Pearson Education.
15. Fayzi ogli, A. I. (2022). Teaching English to Students with Visual Impairments: Problems and Solutions. *Thematics Journal of English Language Teaching*, 6(1).
16. Fayzi ogli, I. (2021, May). PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS OF TEACHING CLASSES WITH BLIND STUDENTS. In *Archive of Conferences* (Vol. 26, No. 1, pp. 13-15).
17. ogli Asrorov, I. F. (2020). The Content Of Teaching Foreign Languages. *Scientific Bulletin Of Namangan State University*, 2(11), 322-326.
18. Asrorov, I. (2021). TIPS FOR THE TEACHERS WORKING WITH BLIND STUDENTS IN A LANGUAGE CLASSROOM. *Galaxy International Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 9(05), 474-476.
19. kizi Eshboeva, D. A., Akbarova, S. K., ugli Hafizov, A. A., & ugli Asrorov, I. F. (2022). PSYCHOLINGUISTIC FEATURES OF TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO PRESCHOOL CHILDREN. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(2), 4509-4518.
20. Ogli, A. I. F. (2020). Defining learning disorders and learning disabled children (Children who have problems learning). *Наука и образование сегодня*, (3 (50)), 71-73.
21. Asrorov, I. F. (2020). THE IMPORTANCE OF INDIVIDUAL FEATURES IN THE CLASSROOM. *Central Asian Problems of Modern Science and Education*, 2020(1), 98-105.
22. Asrorov, I. (2024). SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF STANDARDIZED ASSESSMENT IN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN UZBEKISTAN. *Oriental renaissance: Innovative, educational, natural and social sciences*, 4(9), 84-90.