

## Rethinking Social Justice in English Language Testing: A Critique of Neoliberal Practices

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### ABSTRACT

As English is increasingly positioned as a tool for economic advancement, its curriculum is often shaped by neoliberal ideologies that prioritize standardized testing and commodify language proficiency. This study investigates how such ideologies impact English language testing and learning. Using a qualitative design, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 12 English language teachers and 12 students, all with direct experience of high-stakes standardized exams (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS, CEFR-based tests). Thematic analysis revealed that these exams often narrow pedagogical practices, prioritize test-taking strategies over communicative competence, and neglect crucial language skills such as speaking and listening. Participants also reported heightened anxiety, reduced motivation, and a mismatch between test preparation and real-world language use. Moreover, the tests disadvantage students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, further increasing educational inequities. In response, the study advocates for a critical language testing framework grounded in inclusivity, socio-political awareness, and real-world tasks. This approach aims to redefine language assessment practices to promote educational equity and social justice in global English language education.

### 1. Introduction

As Harvey (2005, p. 33) states, neoliberalism represents the “financialization of everything.” In English language teaching, neoliberal ideologies—emphasizing market-driven policies, individualism, and competition—have reshaped language education systems (Hastings, 2019). Language is increasingly treated as a commodity or economic tool, sidelining its cultural, social, and political roles (Block et al., 2013). Companies such as Pearson have capitalized on these shifts through resource development and government contracts (Hogan, 2016). This neoliberalization affects curricula, teaching methods, and assessments, promoting privatization, standardized testing, and economic advantage. Consequently, language education now often prioritizes measurable outcomes over linguistic diversity, cultural awareness, and social equity (Piller & Cho, 2013; Shohamy, 2022). Medina and Neill (1990, p. 36) mentioned,

Unfortunately, too many policymakers and educators have ignored the complexities of testing issues and the obvious limitations they should place on standardized test use. Instead, they have been seduced by the promise of simplicity and objectivity. The price which has been paid by our schools and our children for their infatuation with tests is high.

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Neoliberalism's impact on language education reveals significant challenges. Standardized assessments such as those aligned with the CEFR often favor dominant linguistic norms, disadvantaging marginalized learners (Byram & Parmenter, 2012; Canale, 2021; Savski, 2020). The commercialization of testing also raises issues of transparency, equity, and accountability (McNamara, 2000). In response, scholars advocate for critical language testing, which expands beyond linguistic competence to address socio-cultural and political contexts. By highlighting power relations and promoting fairness and social justice, this approach seeks to create more inclusive assessment practices (Shohamy, 2001; 2022).

By interviewing 12 teachers and 12 students, this study aims to explore the intersection of neoliberalism and language testing within the Iranian context of English language education. By critically examining the influence of neoliberal ideologies on language testing practices, this research seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions in the field of language education. Through an analysis of theoretical, practical, and empirical evidence, this study endeavors to shed light on the complexities of language testing in neoliberal contexts and provide insights for educators, policymakers, and researchers striving to create more inclusive and equitable language education systems.

## 2. Review of Literature

### 2.1. Neoliberalization of Language

The perpetuation of neoliberal ideologies and practices supports a viewpoint which treats language solely as a discrete skill and often ignores its broader contextual and societal implications and consequences (Bori & Canale, 2022). Neoliberalism, as applied to English language education, embodies a multifaceted approach characterized by market-oriented policies, deregulation, and the promotion of competition and individualism within educational systems (Block et al., 2013). Because of its crucial function in the phenomenon of globalization and the historical connection of English with colonial dominions across various regions, English language teaching has consistently confronted ideological discussions (Babaii & Sheikhi, 2017). Central to neoliberal ideology is the belief in the superiority of the free market and the limited role of government intervention in public services, including education. In the context of English language teaching, neoliberal policies often manifest in the form of privatization, standardized testing, and the commodification of language skills (Canagarajah, 2005). This neoliberal paradigm emphasizes efficiency, accountability, and measurable outcomes, favoring short-term economic goals over long-term educational objectives (Sellar & Lingard, 2013). This leads to the commercialization of language learning materials and the rise of for-profit language schools (Block et al., 2013). Additionally, neoliberal policies tend to promote linguistic homogenization by privileging dominant languages, such as English, at the expense of linguistic diversity (Pennycook, 2010). Moreover, neoliberal reforms often increase inequalities in access to quality education by further marginalizing vulnerable populations and perpetuating socioeconomic disparities (Apple, 2001).

As advocated by Block et al. (2013), neoliberalism promotes the idea of education as a commodity, where market forces determine its value and distribution. This has led to the rapid spread of private ownership and business-focused approaches within English language education, with private language schools and online platforms becoming important players in the field (Holliday, 2006). Neoliberal policies have encouraged the standardization of English language proficiency assessments, such as TOEFL and IELTS, to meet the demands of globalized labor markets (Canagarajah, 2005). These assessments often prioritize instrumental language use for economic purposes, neglecting the diverse linguistic and cultural needs of learners (Pennycook, 2010). Furthermore, neoliberal ideologies have influenced language education policies by promoting accountability measures and competition among institutions. This has resulted in the implementation of standardized testing and performance-based funding models, which prioritize measurable outcomes over holistic educational goals (Ball, 2012). In English language education, this has translated into a narrowed curriculum focused on teaching language skills that are easily quantifiable and marketable, rather than fostering critical language awareness and intercultural competence (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Additionally, neoliberal policies have exacerbated inequalities in access to quality English language education, as marginalized groups often lack the resources to participate in privatized language learning opportunities (May & Sleeter, 2010). Therefore, the influence of neoliberalism on English language education underscores

the need for critical examination and alternative approaches that prioritize educational equity and social justice.

The influence of neoliberalism on language curriculum, teaching methods, and assessment practices in English language education has been profound, shaping the landscape of language teaching and learning in various ways. In the realm of language curriculum, this has led to a focus on instrumental language learning, where language skills are seen primarily as tools for economic advancement rather than vehicles for cultural understanding or critical thinking (Pennycook, 2017). As a result, language curricula often prioritize the teaching of pragmatic language skills needed for specific professional contexts, without enough attention paid to the broader linguistic and cultural competencies. Assessment practices have been influenced by neoliberal principles, with a growing emphasis on high-stakes standardized tests that seem somehow decontextualized (Shohamy, 2001; 2022). These assessment practices not only shape teaching and learning priorities but also perpetuate inequalities by favoring those who can afford test preparation courses or who come from privileged linguistic backgrounds. With regard to this, Spolsky (1995) mentioned,

From its beginnings, testing has been exploited also as a method of control and power – as a way to select, to motivate, to punish. The so-called objective test, by virtue of its claim of scientific backing for its impartiality, and especially when it operates under the aegis and with the efficiency of big business, is even more brutally effective in exercising this authority. (p. 1)

Therefore, the neoliberal agenda in English language education has led to a narrowing of educational goals, prioritizing economic outcomes over the development of critically engaged language learners. Consequently, people often find themselves obligated to invest in acquiring the necessary skills in English to meet the societal expectations and succeed in the highly competitive neoliberal economy. In this context, the idea of English being seen as a neutral skill and a pure gateway to opportunities has led to the growth of a profitable industry focused on English language education (Park, 2016). The primary focus in education, especially in higher education, has shifted toward knowledge capitalism. Institutes are now charged with preparing students with essential abilities and expertise to succeed in the competitive and dynamic global knowledge-driven economy (Holborow 2013).

## 2.2. Critical Language Testing

Critical language testing is rooted in critical theory and critical applied linguistics (Foucault, 1979; Pennycook, 2021). Critical language testing in English language education aims at evaluating language proficiency beyond mere linguistic competence by incorporating socio-cultural, political, and critical dimensions (Shohamy, 2001). As proposed by McNamara (2000), critical language testing seeks to uncover the power dynamics inherent in language assessment, considering the social implications of language use and assessment practices. Key principles of critical language testing include reflexivity, which involves critically examining the role of language testers and test developers in constructing assessments, and authenticity, emphasizing the relevance of assessment tasks to real-world language use scenarios (Shohamy, 2001). Additionally, Fairclough (1992) emphasizes the importance of considering the broader socio-political context in language testing, acknowledging the influence of societal power structures on language assessment practices and outcomes.

One of the primary goals is to uncover biases and inequalities embedded within language testing practices, thereby promoting fairness and equity in assessment. For instance, researchers such as McNamara and Roever (2006) emphasize the importance of considering the socio-cultural backgrounds of test takers to ensure that assessments are not inadvertently favoring certain groups over others. By critically examining the underlying assumptions and ideologies behind language tests, educators and policymakers can work toward creating more inclusive and culturally sensitive assessment tools, thereby promoting language proficiency that is not only functional but also socially and culturally appropriate (Weir, 2005). This approach emphasizes the importance of considering factors such as power dynamics, identity construction, and sociopolitical contexts in language assessment, ensuring that learners develop skills that enable them to navigate real-world interactions effectively (Shohamy, 2001; 2022). By integrating critical perspectives into language testing, educators aim to foster language learners who are not only competent users of English but also critical thinkers capable of understanding

and challenging the structures and discourses embedded within language use. The objectives of critical language testing include promoting language assessment practices that are fair, equitable, and inclusive (McNamara, 2000). This involves designing assessments that acknowledge and respect the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of learners, thereby avoiding biases that may disadvantage certain groups (Kubota & Lin, 2009).

In the realm of critical language testing in English language education, key concepts such as validity, fairness, and social justice are pivotal in ensuring equitable assessment practices. Validity, as defined by Messick (1989), refers to “an integrated evaluative judgment of the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness of inferences and actions based on test scores or other modes of assessment” (p. 11). In critical language testing, validity extends beyond the traditional notion of validity to encompass aspects of social validity, which involve considering the impact of the assessment on various social groups and contexts (Shohamy, 2001). This necessitates an examination of the cultural and linguistic diversity among test takers to ensure that the assessment accurately reflects their language proficiency and abilities. In this regard, Moss (1998, p. 11) rightly writes,

The scope of the [validity] argument goes well beyond these test specific evaluation practices; it entails ongoing evaluation of the dialectical relationship between the products and practices of testing, writ large, and the social reality that is recursively represented and transformed.

Fairness in testing, as advocated by Kunnan (2004), underscores the importance of providing all test takers with an equal opportunity to demonstrate their language skills, regardless of their background or socio-economic status. In critical language testing, fairness also entails addressing potential biases embedded within test items or procedures that may disadvantage certain groups of test takers (McNamara, 2000). Achieving fairness involves implementing inclusive testing practices, such as offering accommodations for diverse learners and incorporating culturally relevant content in assessments. Furthermore, considerations of social justice in critical language testing highlight the broader societal implications of language assessment practices (Alderson, 2000). This involves interrogating power dynamics within testing contexts and striving for equitable outcomes that promote linguistic empowerment and access to educational opportunities for all individuals, particularly those from marginalized communities (Paris & Alim, 2017; Shohamy, 2022).

### **2.3. The Often Overlooked Link**

Critiquing neoliberal ideologies within the realm of language testing in English language education unveils several pervasive issues. Neoliberalism’s emphasis on market-driven principles has significantly influenced language testing practices, often leading to a commodification of language proficiency and an overreliance on standardized assessments. This commodification of language proficiency through standardized tests perpetuates inequalities by favoring those with access to resources for test preparation (Makoni & Pennycook, 2006). With regard to this, Bacon and Kim (2018) found that conversations among participants regarding English language usage indicated little correlation between language learning and genuine interpersonal interaction. Rather, their attention turned toward utilizing their English exam results and perceived language skills to gain social, educational, and peer benefits. Specifically related to this is the CEFR, established by the Council of Europe in 2001 that has significantly influenced language education by providing standardized criteria for assessing proficiency. Canale (2021) argues that over-reliance on these metrics may disconnect learners from the social and political contexts of language learning. Beyond evaluation, the CEFR’s procedures impact language education globally. Many countries, both within and outside Europe, use it to design courses and select materials, often promoting a *teaching to the test* mentality (Savski, 2020). Moreover, the CEFR has become a marketable brand, leading to the commercialization of language products such as textbooks and exams. Regarding this argument on CEFR, McNamara and Roever (2006, p. 213) mention,

There is a tendency for governments to use assessment as part of a general climate of greater accountability in education and, more specifically, as a means for the

achievement of particular political goals. The politicization of assessment in these ways is perhaps the most striking feature of current developments in language assessment.

Critics further contend that neoliberal language testing practices reinforce hegemonic power structures and serve the interests of dominant English-speaking nations and corporations (Mignolo, 2002). Language tests, often designed in the context of Western cultural norms, can impose cultural biases that disadvantage non-native English speakers (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Additionally, the privatization of language testing services under neoliberal frameworks raises concerns about transparency, accountability, and equity in assessment practices (McNamara, 2000). As such, there is a growing call among scholars and educators for a critical reevaluation of language testing paradigms, advocating for approaches that recognize the complex socio-cultural dimensions of language learning and promote linguistic justice and inclusivity (Norton, 2013).

Smith (2022) contends that adopting a market-centric strategy in English language policy can be perceived as a form of repression. However, critical language testing challenges these assumptions by highlighting the importance of socio-political factors in language acquisition and assessment (Norton & Toohey, 2011). Critical language testing offers a nuanced perspective that challenges the neoliberal assumptions pervasive in language education. Neoliberal ideologies often prioritize quantifiable outcomes, reducing language learning to a commodified transaction rather than a multifaceted process deeply intertwined with culture and identity (Piller & Cho, 2013; Holborow, 2015). As Bachman (2000) argues, traditional language tests often fail to consider the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of learners, leading to marginalization and exclusion. By foregrounding issues of social justice and equity, critical language testing highlights the need for assessments that are sensitive to the socio-political contexts in which language learning occurs. This challenges the neoliberal assumptions of meritocracy in education.

Fulcher and Davidson (2007) contend that these methods fail to consider the socio-political aspects of language skills, thereby perpetuating disparities and sidelining various linguistic identities. Critical language testing frameworks, as advocated by scholars such as McNamara and Roever (2006), interrogate the inherent power dynamics embedded within language assessments. These frameworks recognize that language proficiency is not solely determined by individual merit but is profoundly shaped by socio-cultural contexts, historical legacies, and unequal power structures. This perspective emphasizes the importance of addressing systemic injustice and empowering marginalized communities. For instance, May (2011) argues that language assessments should move beyond simplistic notions of linguistic competence and consider how language use intersects with issues of power, privilege, and access. This is what critical language testing does by encouraging educators to adopt inclusive pedagogies that recognize and value diverse linguistic repertoires, which eventually leads to challenging hegemonic norms imposed by dominant groups. Therefore, critical examination of language testing offers a transformative vision for language education that prioritizes equity, social responsibility, and the recognition of language as a site of resistance against neoliberal ideologies.

#### **2.4. Practical Considerations**

Integrating critical language testing into English education offers a promising approach to address the pervasive neoliberal challenges within the field. Critical language testing, grounded in critical pedagogy principles, provides a counterbalance by focusing on assessing language proficiency within real-world contexts and promoting social justice-oriented language practices (Freire, 1970; McNamara, 1996). By incorporating critical language testing into English education, educators can better equip students with the linguistic skills necessary to navigate diverse social and cultural landscapes while challenging dominant neoliberal discourses that prioritize economic outcomes over societal well-being. Such integration of critical language testing can foster a more inclusive and equitable English education system by acknowledging and valuing linguistic diversity (Norton, 2000; Shohamy, 2022). Critical language testing embraces a plurilingual perspective, respecting the importance of incorporating students' language backgrounds into assessment practices (Cummins, 2001; Shohamy, 2001; Souzandehfar, 2024). By doing so, critical language testing not only enhances the validity and authenticity of language assessment but also promotes social justice by empowering linguistically diverse learners within the English education system.

The implementation of critical language testing approaches encounters limitations in practice, particularly regarding institutional resistance and resource constraints. Educational establishments frequently oppose departing from conventional evaluation methods because of deeply ingrained power dynamics and interests invested in preserving the current state (Giroux, 2004; Apple, 2004; Weir, 2005). Furthermore, the operationalization of critical language testing approaches presents practical challenges due to the complexities of assessing nuanced constructs such as critical language awareness (McNamara & Roever, 2006). Developing valid and reliable assessment instruments that capture these constructs requires careful attention to contextual factors and the diverse linguistic repertoires of test takers, which can be resource-intensive and time-consuming (Moss, 2003). Moreover, the use of critical language testing approaches may be constrained by other institutional constraints such as limited funding and expertise, particularly in contexts where educational policies prioritize cost-effectiveness over social justice imperatives (McKay & Bokhorst-Heng, 2008). While critical language testing approaches offer valuable insights for addressing neoliberal problems in English language education, their widespread adoption hinges on overcoming these challenges and building robust support networks among educators, policymakers, and assessment specialists.

One practical approach to implementing critical language testing is through the use of formative assessments that emphasize student reflection and self-assessment. According to Rea-Dickins (2001) and Ghazizadeh and Motallebzadeh (2017), formative assessments provide continuous feedback and promote self-regulated learning. This aligns with the principles of critical language testing by empowering students to take an active role in their learning process. This method shifts the focus from merely testing language proficiency to encouraging learners to critically analyze their progress and linguistic capabilities, fostering a deeper understanding of their learning journey (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Furthermore, educators should leverage technology to enhance the accessibility and inclusivity of critical language testing. Digital platforms can facilitate authentic language use, interactive assessment tasks, and real-time feedback, thereby promoting learner autonomy and equitable access to language learning opportunities (Warschauer, 2002; Walker, 2018; Souzandehfar, 2024). However, it is crucial to remain vigilant against the potential commodification of technological education within neoliberal contexts, because as posited by Bernstein et al. (2015), the doctrine of neoliberalism has reconceptualized the English language as a commodifiable skill imbued with technological prowess, concurrently regarding individuals predominantly through the lens of their economic utility.

As mentioned, neoliberal ideologies often prioritize competition over collaboration and equity (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Educators play a pivotal role in implementing critical language testing practices in the classroom to resolve those issues. For example, educators can design tasks and assessments that prompt students to analyze how language is used to perpetuate or challenge dominant narratives and structures of power (Pennycook, 2021). Moreover, educators should foster a supportive learning environment that encourages students to voice their perspectives and engage in meaningful dialogue about language, identity, and social justice (Kubota & Lin, 2006). This requires a paradigm shift from traditional standardized testing models toward more authentic and contextually relevant assessment methods (McNamara, 2000). Authentic assessment approaches, such as performance-based tasks and portfolio assessment, allow students to demonstrate their language skills in real-world contexts and encourage critical reflection on language use and its societal implications (McNamara & Roever, 2006; Brown, 2018).

Scholars such as Babaii and Sheikhi (2017), Bori and Canale (2022), and Farsani and Rahimi (2022) promote employing criticality as a strategy to mitigate the risks associated with neoliberalism. According to Giroux and McLaren (1986), critical educators need to be open to adjusting their own beliefs and viewpoints to better suit the needs and perspectives of their students. In this regard, critical pedagogy encourages educators to adopt a praxis-oriented approach that bridges theory and practice, making learners active members of the community of English language testing (Giroux, 2020). Drawing from the principles of critical pedagogy and participatory action research (PAR), this approach allows for the development of contextually relevant assessment practices that reflect the diverse needs and experiences of learners (Freire, 1970; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). By integrating critical pedagogy principles into testing methodologies, educators can cultivate critical literacy skills that enable learners to question, analyze, and resist the neoliberal ideologies embedded within language assessment practices (Luke, 2012).

### 3. Method

This study employs a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews to explore how neoliberal language testing practices influence students and teachers in English language education. Given the paper's focus on critical language testing and social justice, this approach allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, experiences, and critiques of standardized assessments.

#### 3.1. Participants and Recruitment

The study involved 12 teachers (mean age = 29.33 years, SD = 4.31) and 12 students (mean age = 25.92 years, SD = 4.06), all engaged in the context of teaching or taking standardized language proficiency tests such as TOEFL, IELTS, and CEFR-based exams. Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) was employed to ensure participants had relevant experiences with these testing systems. The inclusion criteria for participants are as follows: (1) Students must have taken at least one high-stakes standardized English language test in the last two years. (2) Teachers must have at least five years of experience teaching English, with direct involvement in preparing students for standardized tests. All participants provided informed consent before participation. Finally, we selected twelve teachers and twelve students as the participants of our study.

#### 3.2. Data Collection Method

Online semi-structured interviews via Google Meet with both students and teachers were the main instrument for qualitative data collection. Individual one-hour interviews were conducted, allowing flexibility in responses while maintaining consistency across participants. The following research questions were developed based on the existing literature. The interview questions (see Appendix A) were then developed based on these research questions:

1. How do students and teachers perceive the fairness and impact of standardized English language tests within a neoliberal framework?
2. How do standardized language tests shape English language teaching and learning practices?

#### 3.3. Data Analysis

A thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to analyze the data by focusing on recurring themes and patterns. The process began with familiarization, which involved transcribing interviews verbatim and conducting multiple readings. Next, initial codes were generated by identifying significant phrases, patterns, and recurring ideas within the transcripts. These codes were then grouped into broader themes, such as fairness, accessibility, and the impact on pedagogy. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence, depth, and alignment with the research questions. Subsequently, each theme was clearly defined and named, accompanied by detailed descriptions supported by evidence from participants. Finally, the findings were reported through a structured analysis that integrated participants' voices with relevant theoretical insights. This process was done manually. You can see an example of how we did that in Appendix B.

#### 3.4. Ethical Considerations

This study adheres to ethical research principles, ensuring participant rights and confidentiality in accordance with British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) guidelines. Key ethical considerations include obtaining informed consent, where participants received a detailed consent form outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. Anonymity and confidentiality were maintained by removing all personal identifiers and using pseudonyms in reporting. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. Additionally, data protection measures were implemented by securely storing all data, which was accessible only to the research team.

### 4. Results

The following section presents findings related to how students and teachers perceive the fairness and impact of standardized English language tests within a neoliberal educational framework. Drawing from participant perspectives, the results reveal key themes. Below, we present these themes.

**4.1. Research Question 1:** How do students and teachers perceive the fairness and impact of standardized English language tests within a neoliberal framework?

#### 4.1.1. Shift Toward Test-Oriented Instruction

Participants frequently noted that classroom practices are increasingly shaped by the demands of standardized tests.

Teacher's Perspective: *"Most of my class time is about practicing writing essays under timed conditions and reviewing reading comprehension strategies. I find myself less able to explore topics that might be of interest to the students, such as current events, because I need to focus on the core test components."* (Mehdi, Teacher)

Student's Perspective: *"We could have more fun activities like watching English videos or playing games, but instead, most of our classes are about taking practice tests."* (Sara, Student)

This suggests a narrowing of pedagogical focus, privileging test content over student interest, highlighting an instrumentalist approach to learning. It is also indicating a reduction in intrinsic motivation and creativity in the learning environment due to test pressure.

#### 4.1.2 Psychological and Emotional Effects of Testing

Student's Perspective: *"IELTS is really expensive for me. When thinking about how much money has been spent on it, the stress becomes overwhelming—especially if things go wrong and there's a need to retake the test. It's really frightening!"* (Mohammad, Student)

Teacher's Perspective: *"While standardized tests do motivate the students to study harder, they also create a lot of anxiety. When they see their scores, they feel like they're either succeeding or failing based on a single exam, which is discouraging."* (Shima, Teacher)

Financial burden contributes to heightened anxiety, especially affecting students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The teacher's opinion shows that the pressure of tests changes the way students see themselves and their learning journey.

#### 4.1.3. Motivation: Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic

Teacher's Perspective: *"Students who are goal-driven work hard to pass the test, but they rarely develop a passion for the language itself."* (Reza, Teacher)

Student's Perspective: *"I've passed the TOEFL exam, but I know I'm not great at speaking. I just memorize set phrases and responses."* (Leila, Student)

This means that external rewards become more important than personal interest, turning language learning into just a way to earn certificates. It suggests surface-level preparation that undermines genuine communicative competence.

#### 4.1.4. Perceived Fairness and Socioeconomic Disparities

Students reported that wealthier peers had access to more resources (e.g., tutors, private courses), creating unequal conditions.

Teacher's Perspective: *"Some of my students can afford private IELTS classes, foreign books, and even mock exams every week. Others are just trying to prepare on their own with outdated materials. When results come out, of course the ones with more support perform better — but it doesn't mean they're more talented or hardworking."* (Mina, Teacher)

Student's Perspective: *"My friend takes classes at a really expensive language school and even had a private tutor for IELTS. I just study at home using free YouTube videos. When I got a lower score, it felt unfair, like the test wasn't just checking English, but how much money you have."* (Ali, Student)

This shows that tests such as IELTS favor students who have more money for extra help, making it seem like success is all about personal effort while hiding the unfair differences in access to resources.

Table 1  
*Summary of Answers to the First Research Question*

Theme	Description	Teacher Example	Student Example
Shift Toward Test-Oriented Instruction	Instruction increasingly focused on test preparation, limiting pedagogical freedom.	“Most of my class time is about practicing writing essays under timed conditions...” – Mehdi	“We could have more fun activities... but instead, most of our classes are about taking practice tests.” – Sara
Psychological and Emotional Effects	High costs and pressure create stress and anxiety among both students and teachers.	“Standardized tests... create a lot of anxiety... they feel like they’re either succeeding or failing based on a single exam.” – Shirin	“IELTS is really expensive... the stress becomes overwhelming...” – Mohammad
Motivation: Extrinsic vs. Intrinsic	Motivation for test success replaces genuine interest in language learning.	“Students... work hard to pass the test, but they rarely develop a passion for the language itself.” – Reza	“I’ve passed the TOEFL exam... I just memorize set phrases and responses.” – Leila
Perceived Fairness & Socioeconomic Disparities	Students with financial resources access more support, creating unequal opportunities.	“Some of my students can afford private IELTS classes, foreign books, and even mock exams every week ... but it doesn’t mean they’re more talented or hardworking.” – Mina	“My friend takes classes at a really expensive language school and even had a private tutor for IELTS. I just study at home using free YouTube videos. When I got a lower score, it felt unfair ...” – Ali

#### 4.2. *Research Question 2*: How do standardized language tests shape English language teaching and learning practices?

##### 4.2.1. Neglect of Speaking and Listening Skills

Teacher’s Perspective: “*Students become great at writing essays under time pressure, but when they travel abroad, they even struggle to order coffee.*” (Ali, Teacher)

Student’s Perspective: “*I have memorized grammar rules for the test, but when I try to talk to a native speaker through online panel discussions, I freeze.*” (Narges, Student)

The teacher’s comment highlights a disconnect between test content and real-world communicative demands, and the student’s comment suggests lack of preparation for spontaneous and interactive communication.

##### 4.2.2. Mismatch Between Testing and Real-World English Use

Teacher’s Perspective: “*The rigid structure of these exams doesn’t test how well students can adapt their language in different social or professional contexts.*” (Farhad, Teacher)

Student’s Perspective: “*I got a high score in IELTS, but when I traveled, I couldn’t understand native speakers at normal speed.*” (Fatemeh, Student)

These comments show a lack of adaptability in test design to diverse linguistic scenarios. They are also indicating that test performance does not correlate with authentic language comprehension.

### 4.2.3. Social and Cultural Dimensions of Language Use

Teacher's Perspective: "Real-world English is about having the ability to switch between formal and informal language, and something like understanding jokes. These tests focus on precision, but communication is much messier than that." (Ali, Teacher)

Student's Perspective: "I need to understand casual phrases and humor in English, but the tests don't prepare me for that. I feel unprepared when people speak casually, especially if they use slang." (Mohammad, Student)

This theme suggests that tests ignore pragmatic competence, which is essential for sociolinguistic navigation. The teacher and the student point to a lack of cultural literacy in test design. This highlights how neoliberalized tests such as IELTS and TOEFL prioritize formal language skills over authentic, everyday communication, leaving test-takers unprepared for real-life casual speech and cultural nuances such as slang and humor.

Table 2

#### Summary of Answers to the Second Research Question

Theme	Description	Teacher Example	Student Example
Neglect of Speaking and Listening Skills	Emphasis on writing/reading sidelines real-world communication skills.	"Students become great at writing essays... but... struggle to order coffee." – Ali	"I have memorized grammar rules... but... I freeze." – Narges
Mismatch Between Testing and Real-World English Use	Exams do not reflect diverse and authentic communicative demands.	"The rigid structure... doesn't test how well students can adapt... in different contexts." – Farhad	"I got a high score in IELTS, but... couldn't understand native speakers at normal speed." – Fatemeh
Social and Cultural Dimensions of Language Use	Tests ignore sociolinguistic skills such as switching registers, understanding humor, or slang.	"Real-world English... is about... understanding jokes. These tests focus on precision..." – Ali	"I need to understand casual phrases and humor... the tests don't prepare me for that." – Mohammad

## 5. Discussion

This study provides critical insight into how standardized English language tests are shaping educational experiences and outcomes for students and teachers under the influence of neoliberal ideologies. The themes emerging from participant narratives show a significant convergence between empirical data and theoretical concerns regarding equity, authenticity, and learner agency in assessment.

### 5.1. Neoliberalism and the Standardization of Language Education

The pervasive focus on test preparation, highlighted by both Mehdi (T) and Sara (S), is an indicator of what Ball (2003) terms the *performative culture* of neoliberal education—where value is measured in output, not process. Teachers are motivated to teach to the test, and students are conditioned to associate success with high scores rather than communicative competence.

"Most of my class time is about practicing writing essays under timed conditions..." (Mehdi, Teacher)

This shows how neoliberal policies require everyone to follow the same rules and be held responsible, which often limits teachers' ability to be flexible and focus on each student's needs (Au, 2011). Instead of fostering exploratory or critical engagement with language, instruction becomes about test-taking strategies, reducing language to a mechanistic set of tasks.

"We could have more fun activities... but instead, most of our classes are about taking practice tests." (Sara, Student)

This quote shows how learners take in the idea of being efficient and always trying to improve—key traits of a person shaped by neoliberal ideas, who feels they must always work hard and deliver results while being watched by others (Foucault, 2008).

### **5.2. Emotional Stress and Socioeconomic Exclusion**

The psychological consequences described by Mohammad (S) and Shirin (T) emphasize how standardized tests, often presented as neutral, are embedded in systems of inequity and exclusion. The economic burden of exams such as IELTS and TOEFL, which often require expensive prep resources and retakes, introduces a form of structural violence against economically disadvantaged learners (Giroux, 2020).

*“IELTS is really expensive for me... the stress becomes overwhelming.”* (Mohammad, Student)

This shows how market-driven testing treats language skills like a product. In this way, success becomes purchasable, and failure becomes a reflection of one’s economic position, not just linguistic competence. Shirin’s (T) observation about students’ self-worth being tied to scores reflects how testing under neoliberalism imposes a system of winners and losers, which hurts learners’ confidence and long-term motivation (Menken, 2008).

### **5.3. Instrumental Motivation and Surface Learning**

Reza (T) and Leila’s (S) comments further illustrate how high-stakes standardized assessments cultivate extrinsic motivation, with students viewing language learning as a means to an end rather than an intrinsically valuable process.

*“Students who are goal-driven work hard to pass the test, but they rarely develop a passion for the language itself.”* (Reza, Teacher)

*“I’ve passed the TOEFL... I just memorize set phrases and responses.”* (Leila, Student)

These observations confirm Cheng’s (2004) findings on negative washback, where exam pressures encourage strategic, surface-level learning. The ability to memorize formulaic expressions may enable test success but undermines adaptive language use, which is essential in real-world communication.

### **5.4. Disconnect Between Assessment and Real-World Language Use**

Participants repeatedly noted a gap between what tests measure and what actual language use demands. Farhad’s (T) and Fatemeh’s (S) insights illustrate the inflexibility of test structures, which ignore context-sensitive, spontaneous communication.

*“The rigid structure of these exams doesn’t test how well students can adapt their language in different social or professional contexts.”* (Farhad, Teacher)

This confirms the critique by McNamara (2006) that standardized tests represent an oversimplification of communicative competence, favoring linguistic precision over functional language use. Similarly, Ali (T) and Mohammad (S) stress how standardized tests exclude the pragmatic and sociocultural dimensions of language, such as humor, idioms, or tone.

*“Real-world English is about having the ability to switch between formal and informal language... communication is much messier.”* (Ali, Teacher)

Neoliberal test models focus too much on technical skills and efficiency (Shohamy, 2001), ignoring the important goal of helping learners develop real-life communication skills for social justice. The recommendations from teachers and students advocate for alternative assessment practices grounded in authenticity, fairness, and learner empowerment. Suggestions such as using portfolios, interactive tasks, and flexible writing genres reflect calls in the literature for humanizing assessment (Kunnan, 2018; Leung & Scott, 2009).

Moreover, participants’ focus on access, affordability, and inclusiveness reflects a critical approach to assessment—one that avoids reducing learners to just test scores and instead acknowledges the many different language skills and learning paths they have (Canagarajah, 2006).

## **6. Conclusion**

This study revealed how standardized English language tests, shaped by neoliberal ideologies, are impacting both teaching and learning practices. The findings indicated a shift toward test-oriented instruction, where pedagogical freedom is sacrificed in favor of exam preparation. Teachers and

students alike reported reduced intrinsic motivation, emotional stress, and a decreased focus on authentic language use. Moreover, the cost of exams such as IELTS and TOEFL imposes a financial burden that leads to unequal opportunities, placing students from lower-income families at a significant disadvantage. Participants also highlighted a mismatch between what is tested and the communicative demands of real-life English use, with skills such as speaking, listening, and cultural literacy being sidelined. These empirical insights support critical concerns about the neoliberalization of language education, where language proficiency becomes commodified and narrowly defined by standardized metrics. The emphasis on performance, efficiency, and competition reflects broader neoliberal values that prioritize economic advantage over educational equity and learner development.

In response, critical language testing emerges as a necessary counter-framework—one that prioritizes fairness, social justice, and contextual relevance. By integrating authentic assessment tasks, valuing diverse linguistic backgrounds, and addressing the socio-political dimensions of language use, educators can resist the narrow focus of standardized testing. However, this shift demands institutional support, fair sharing of resources, and a fundamental change in how assessment is conceived and implemented. Ultimately, adopting a critical approach to language testing offers a transformative path forward. It challenges hegemonic power structures, promotes inclusivity, and empowers learners not merely to pass tests, but to engage meaningfully with language in diverse, real-world contexts.

That said, a key limitation of this study is its limited focus on intersectionality. While socioeconomic disparities were discussed, other intersecting identity factors—such as race, gender, disability, and migration status—were not systematically explored. Future research could more deeply investigate how these overlapping identities shape individuals' experiences with standardized language testing. Incorporating an intersectional lens would offer a more comprehensive understanding of the structural inequalities embedded in current assessment systems.

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The authors did not use AI to generate the information presented in this article.

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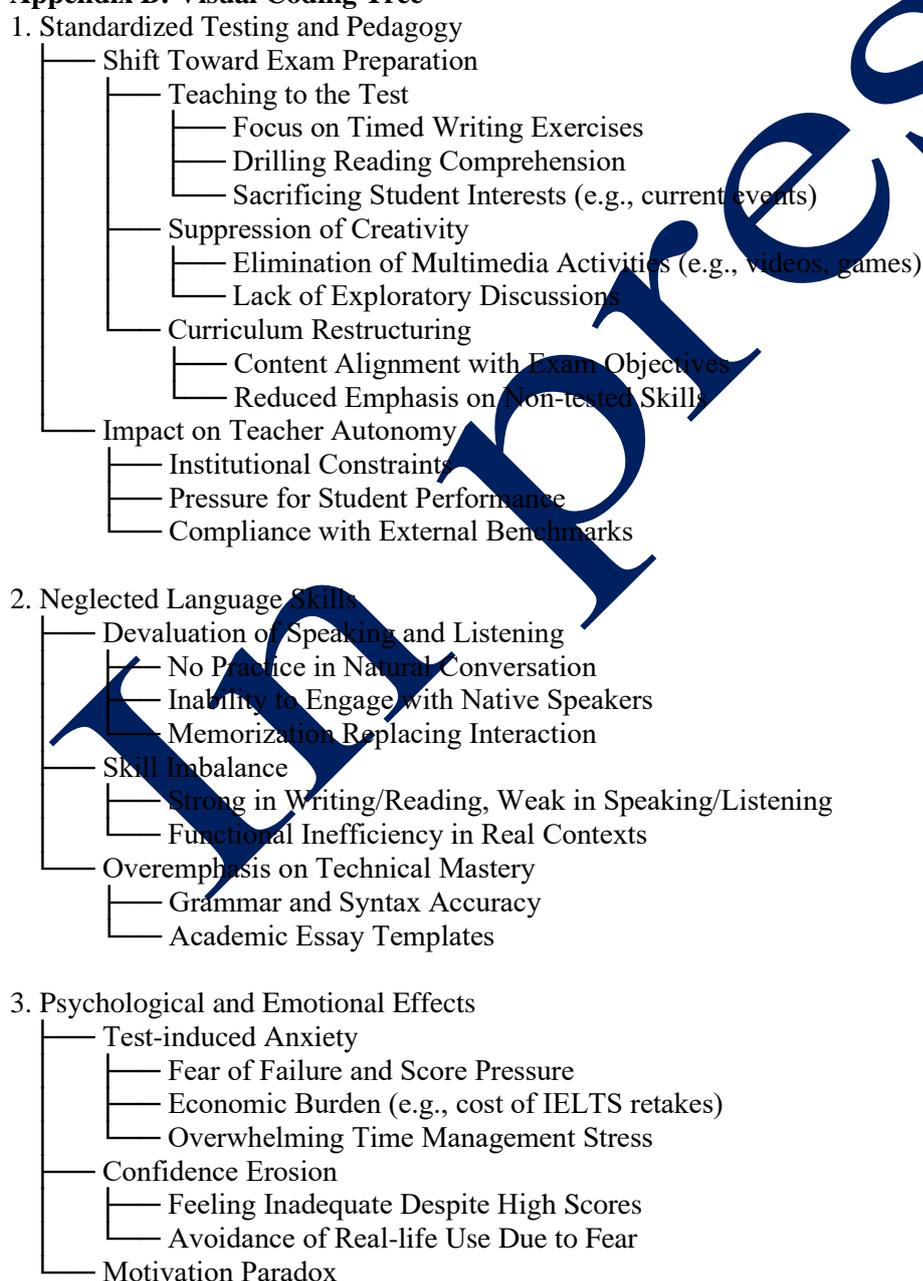
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In Progress

## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. How would you describe your experience with standardized English language tests?
2. Do you feel that these tests accurately reflect students' language abilities? Why or why not?
3. How do factors such as socioeconomic background or access to test preparation influence performance on these tests?
4. In what ways do standardized tests create advantages or disadvantages for certain student groups?
5. How do you think these tests could be improved to promote fairness and inclusivity?
6. How do standardized tests shape your teaching methods (for teachers) or learning strategies (for students)?
7. Do you feel that the focus on standardized testing limits or enhances language learning? Why?
8. Have you noticed any shifts in classroom instruction due to the emphasis on test preparation? If so, what are they?
9. What impact do these tests have on students' motivation and confidence in language learning?
10. How do standardized assessments align (or fail to align) with the real-world use of English?

## Appendix B: Visual Coding Tree



- └ Studying for Grades, Not Language
- └ Loss of Passion and Enjoyment

#### 4. Motivation and Learning Identity

- └ Extrinsic Orientation
  - └ Driven by Academic/Career Goals
  - └ Score-Centric Identity Formation
  - └ Strategic but Shallow Engagement
- └ Intrinsic Demotivation
  - └ Disconnect from Language Joy
  - └ Mechanical Learning Approaches
- └ Educational Equity Concerns
  - └ Advantage for Affluent Students
  - └ Tutor Access Disparities
  - └ Unequal Test Preparation Resources

#### 5. Mismatch with Real-World English Use

- └ Artificiality of Testing Formats
  - └ Structured Interviews vs. Real Dialogue
  - └ Clean Audio vs. Natural Accents
  - └ Lack of Casual Vocabulary Exposure
- └ Rigid Language Application
  - └ Difficulty with Code-Switching
  - └ Failure in Unpredictable Interactions
  - └ Inflexibility in Register Adaptation
- └ Practical Skill Disjunction
  - └ Academic Essays vs. Everyday Writing (e.g., email, messages)
  - └ Listening to Test Recordings vs. Conversations in Noisy Environments

#### 6. Sociocultural and Pragmatic Competence

- └ Neglected Pragmatics
  - └ No Evaluation of Tone or Politeness Norms
  - └ Misinterpretation in Social Contexts
  - └ Difficulty in Cross-cultural Communication
- └ Lack of Idiomatic Awareness
  - └ Misunderstanding Slang and Expressions
  - └ Poor Comprehension of Informal Jokes
- └ Missing Contextual Language Skills
  - └ No Role-play or Social Simulation
  - └ Inadequate Exposure to Realistic Scenarios
  - └ Cultural Disconnect in Test Materials