

The Practice of Teaching to the Test in General English Classes: A Case Study of a University in Vietnam

Dang Thi Bao Dung

Faculty of Social Sciences, Can Tho University of Technology, Can Tho City, Vietnam

Tran Thanh Du*

Institute of Foreign Language Training, Thu Dau Mot University, Thu Dau Mot City, Vietnam

Le Van Lanh

Faculty of Social Sciences, Can Tho University of Technology, Can Tho City, Vietnam

Nguyen Huu The

Faculty of Foreign Languages, Ba Ria - Vung Tau College of Education, Vung Tau City, Vietnam

Abstract—The assessment of both students and teachers depends too much on grades, causing most teachers to choose the “teaching to the test” method. This choice is due to the pressure of assessment and also the wishes of most students. This study examines how teachers have implemented “teaching to the test” in their General English (GE) classes, and what their views are on this method. To answer the above questions, a research method including both qualitative and quantitative methods was conducted with teachers at a university in Vietnam. Two data collection tools were a questionnaire and an interview. The results from the questionnaire show that teachers emphasize on test-wiseness training, curriculum narrowing, and motivational activities to maximize students’ final exam performance. However, teaching test content and format, although moderately employed, often overshadows efforts to develop students’ broader communicative and practical language skills. When interviewed about teachers’ views on this approach, they expressed concerns about long-term negative impacts such as limiting the development of comprehensive language skills and reducing students’ career opportunities. Although this approach helps students improve their short-term performance, its negative effects make it necessary for teachers and administrators to reconsider how they assess teachers’ and students’ abilities and rebalance their teaching programs accordingly.

Index Terms—teaching to the test, general English, case study

I. INTRODUCTION

The growing importance of English in Vietnam reflects its global significance as a tool for communication and career advancement. At universities, lecturers play a critical role in equipping students with the necessary English skills to meet graduation requirements and succeed in the workplace. Achieving specific language proficiency scores is often a mandatory benchmark for academic success. Consequently, many English courses are designed with goal-oriented frameworks tailored to students' needs. Teaching to the test has become a popular approach for students aiming for high scores, as they integrate language acquisition with targeted test-taking strategies (Hu & Trenkic, 2021; Koo, 2020). These courses help familiarize students with test content and format, reduce anxiety during exams, and enhance performance by emphasizing strategic question answering and time management. Consistent practice in these areas reinforces the adage that "practice makes perfect" (Mahmood et al., 2022).

However, the prevalence of exam-driven education systems has reshaped the landscape of English teaching and learning. In many cases, classroom time is disproportionately allocated to activities aligned with exam formats rather than fostering communicative competence (Gao, 2012; Ming & Jaya, 2011; Pan & Block, 2011). This phenomenon has led to “test score pollution”, where students become adept at test-taking without genuinely mastering the language (Ntumi et al., 2022).

Despite widespread criticism of "teaching to the test" in various countries, this approach remains prevalent in Vietnam. Instructional practices often depend on individual teacher beliefs (Gebriel & Eid, 2017), with some prioritizing test item practice and others focusing on broader academic skill development (Rathert & Cabaroglu, 2022). This study investigates the implementation of "teaching to the test" in GE classes at a university in Vietnam. It examines whether teachers overly prioritize preparing students for final tests (FT) rather than cultivating essential language competencies. In addition, the

* Corresponding Author. Email: dutt@tdmu.edu.vn

research explores teachers' perspectives on "teaching to the test," including their thoughts and attitudes toward this teaching approach. The findings aim to help teachers critically evaluate whether their methods support meaningful language development or merely cater to assessment demands. Additionally, the study provides insights for administrators to formulate policies that balance exam preparation with broader educational goals. By laying a foundation for further research, this study seeks to contribute to a more holistic understanding of teaching practices across a broader range of educational institutions.

To achieve these, the study addresses the following research questions:

- (1) *To what extent do teachers implement the practice of "teaching to the test" in their General English classes?*
- (2) *What are teachers' perceptions of the practice of teaching to the test?*

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Teaching to the Test*

The concept of teaching to the test typically emerges in high-stakes environments where test scores carry significant weight and influence outcomes for participants (Menken, 2006; Popham, 2001). This instructional approach focuses on teaching specific content that is subsequently assessed at the end of a unit. However, such assessments often aim to verify whether students have memorized a set of procedures rather than fostering a deeper understanding of the material. As a result, this method primarily measures rote memorization rather than critical thinking and analytical skills.

Teaching to the test is particularly prevalent in skill-based learning contexts (Kohn, 2000). One significant limitation of this approach is its potential to misrepresent students' genuine understanding. Moreover, this method frequently emphasizes tasks that mimic test items but may diverge considerably from those encountered in real-world academic or professional settings. Consequently, non-native English-speaking students often achieve the required test scores but continue to struggle with practical English communication in academic or workplace environments (Berman & Cheng, 2001).

B. *Essential Components of Teaching to the Test*

In this study, test content and format, test-wiseness training, curriculum narrowing and motivational activities are discussed as the main components of 'Teaching to the test' (Miyasaka, 2000).

Teaching test content and format predominantly focuses on educating students about the material being assessed and familiarizing them with the structure of the test (Jackson & McGlinn, 2014). This instructional practice encompasses various activities, which can be categorized into four main groups (Moore, 1994; Popham, 1991): (1) preparation based on previous test formats, (2) preparation for the current test format, (3) practicing with the same format as the test, and (4) practicing with different formats from those of the test. In previous-format preparation, students engage in activities derived from previously administered test papers. These activities include practicing with questions from past tests, teaching strategies for approaching similar questions, and familiarizing students with earlier versions of the test to set expectations (Burns et al., 2008). Current-format preparation involves providing students with materials related to the test papers that will be used or may potentially be used in the upcoming test. Similarly, same-format preparation includes offering students a comparable or simulated test format through commercially developed preparation packages, providing practice questions in the same format, and incorporating similarly formatted test items into teacher-created classroom assessments.

Test-wiseness training has been defined in various ways. One of the earliest and most frequently cited definitions is by Millman et al. (1965), who describe test-wiseness as a test-taker's ability to leverage the characteristics and setup of the test or testing environment to achieve a high score. Similarly, Oakland (1972) defines test-wiseness as the skill to demonstrate proficiency in test-taking by utilizing the features and structure of a test and its environment to attain a score that accurately reflects one's abilities. Williams and Dolly (1993) further elaborated on this concept, noting that test-wiseness is the ability of a test-taker to perform better than random chance on a multiple-choice test, regardless of the content being assessed. In other words, test-wiseness strategies can help reduce the level of anxiety (Mo'en et al., 2022) and get high scores (Alnasraween et al., 2020).

Curriculum narrowing, driven by the emphasis on preparing students for standardized tests, often leads teachers to prioritize content that is directly relevant to these assessments. This practice, as highlighted by Hong and Youngs (2008), results in a curriculum heavily influenced by test requirements, shaping both the content teachers cover and the areas on which students focus their studies. Similarly, Brown (2005) observes that teaching to the test often closely mirrors the tests themselves, exacerbating the narrowing of the curriculum. Phelps (2011) further elaborates on this issue, noting that extensive activities in teaching to the test compel teachers to concentrate on strategies that enhance students' test performance rather than fostering a deep understanding of the subject matter. Such activities may include formulating objectives based on previous test items, excluding content that has already been assessed, focusing on test-related vocabulary, and emphasizing materials perceived as critical for test success. This approach also limits interactive classroom activities, such as discussions, pair work, and group work, and shifts classroom time away from subjects not included in the tests (Shepard & Dougherty, 1991). While seemingly a prevalent and unintentional practice, curriculum narrowing has been identified as one of the least effective strategies for enhancing test scores (Baker et al., 2010).

Motivational activities, as described by Moore (1994), are exercises designed to focus classroom attention on the upcoming examination and mentally prepare students for it. Smith (1991) similarly categorizes these activities under the concepts of exhortation and stress inoculation. Such practices may include rewarding students for achieving high scores on in-class or practice tests, offering incentives such as score bonuses to encourage attendance during test weeks, and discussing the long-term benefits of high-test scores for students' future opportunities. Additionally, these activities aim to boost students' confidence by highlighting their potential to perform well on the test and using test reports to identify and address individual strengths and weaknesses. According to Burgess and Head (2005), English instructors often find teaching exam-focused classes particularly rewarding for several reasons. Firstly, students tend to be more motivated due to their shared goal of excelling in their studies. Furthermore, the syllabus is clearly defined and supported by a wealth of published materials, which facilitates structured teaching. Lastly, teachers derive a sense of accomplishment from their role in helping students succeed, especially when favorable exam results reflect their efforts.

C. Washback Effect

When examining the practice of teaching to the test, it is crucial to consider the concept of "washback," which is generally understood as the influence of testing on teaching and learning (Hu & Trenkic, 2021; Rathert & Cabaroglu, 2022). Bailey (1996), after an extensive review of the concept, proposes a basic model that clarifies the mechanics of washback. This model categorizes the effects of test-derived information on test-takers as washback to the learners, while also considering the impact on teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, and counselors. Most existing washback studies are primarily qualitative and exploratory in nature. These studies have identified washback as a highly complex phenomenon, shaped by both contextual and personal factors (Alderson & Wall, 1993). In classroom settings, teacher-related factors are particularly pivotal (Qi, 2005). The interaction between contextual and individual factors in any educational setting determines the nature and extent of washback (Gebriel & Eid, 2017). This article examines the impact of FT scores on teachers' pedagogical approaches and classroom practices.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

A sequential explanatory mixed-methods design was used to comprehensively investigate "teaching to the test" in GE classes. The study integrated quantitative and qualitative methods with different levels of priority. Quantitative data, collected through a structured questionnaire with ten teachers, had a higher priority and provided statistical insights into the prevalence of specific teaching practices. Qualitative data, collected through semi-structured interviews with four teachers, provide nuanced insights into the perceptions, challenges, and long-term impacts of teaching to the test. Integrating these methods ensures triangulation, with quantitative findings informing qualitative inquiry, thus providing both breadth and depth to the analysis.

B. Participants

To assess the extent to which teaching to the test was implemented at a private higher education institution in Vietnam, ten GE teachers were invited to participate in the study. All participants provided informed consent for their responses to be included in the report and published in a scientific journal. The results from the demographic questions revealed key characteristics of the teacher respondents. Two of the teachers in this study are male, while eight are female. The majority of the participants are relatively young, with 80% being under 40 years old. Notably, six of the ten participants have over ten years of teaching experience, while the remaining four have been teaching English for five to ten years. Additionally, six teachers reported feeling pressured when assisting students in preparing for their final tests. Overall, these teachers can be characterized as predominantly young, relatively experienced, and somewhat influenced by the pressures associated with preparing students for exams. Several factors contributed to the limited number of participants in this study. The survey was conducted during the summer semester, a period characterized by fewer classes and a limited number of lecturers teaching basic English courses. Specifically, the faculty comprised 13 full-time teachers and 4 visiting teachers. Despite this, only 11 teachers responded after being invited to participate via the survey link. Unfortunately, the data from one respondent were deemed unusable due to incomplete survey responses, resulting in its exclusion. Some teachers who did not participate cited time constraints and busy schedules as reasons for their non-involvement.

C. Instruments

A questionnaire employed as a research instrument and distributed to the teachers consists of two main sections: Demographics and Classroom Activities. Part I aims to gather information regarding the participants' age, gender, teaching experience, and susceptibility to test-related pressure. Part II includes 34 close-ended questions that assess various indicators of the practice of teaching to the test. Based on the operational framework, these questions are organized into four key components: Teaching Test Content and Format, Test-Wisness Training, Curriculum Narrowing, and Motivational Activities. All questions are formatted using a 5-point Likert scale, allowing respondents to evaluate different aspects of their teaching practices. Additionally, semi-structured interviews comprising four questions were designed to explore teachers' views on the practice of "teaching to the test," its impact on curriculum design and

implementation, and its associated washback effects. These interviews were conducted with four teachers to obtain valuable and specific insights addressing the second research question.

D. Data Collection and Analysis

Initially, the questionnaire and interview questions were administered to four GE teachers as part of a pilot study. The purpose of this pilot study was to assess the instruments' clarity, relevance, and effectiveness in eliciting the required information. Based on the feedback and observations gathered during the pilot study, revisions were made to improve the clarity and relevance of the statements, ensuring better alignment with the research objectives. Following these revisions, the finalized questionnaire and interview were distributed to the participating teachers via Google Forms to collect the necessary data for the study. The data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed quantitatively, whereas the data from the interviews were analyzed qualitatively.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results

- *Results from the questionnaire*

Teaching test content and format: The results from the preliminary analysis of teaching 'test content and format' are presented in Table 1. This component includes 10 items categorized into four groups: (1) same-format preparation, (2) previous-form preparation, (3) current-form preparation, and (4) varied-format preparation. Overall, the teachers have engaged in teaching test content and format with a moderate frequency (M = 3.31).

TABLE 1
FREQUENCY OF TEACHING TEST CONTENT AND FORMAT

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Test content and format	10	2.90	3.80	3.3100	.32813

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Provide class with practice questions in the same format as final tests.	10	3.50	1.080
2. Use a commercially developed test preparation package with parallel form to the final test.	10	3.10	.994
3. Use test items with similar format for teacher-made classroom tests.	10	3.70	.823
4. Use prior-year test questions as practice for the current -year test.	10	3.80	.632
5. Teach students how to approach a question seen on past tests.	10	3.40	.699
6. Show students past versions of the test so that they would know what to expect.	10	2.60	.966
7. Teach vocabulary words that are on the current test.	10	3.30	.949
8. Give students practice exercises with questions of the current test, with a change in the stem or distracters.	10	3.50	.707
9. Give students practice exercises with questions of the current test.	10	2.90	1.197
10. Provide class with practice questions in different formats (open-ended/ filling/ essay/ puzzle).	10	2.30	.949

The records indicate that the highest frequency of the practice of teaching to the test involved same-format preparation (M = 3.43). Specifically, teacher-created classroom tests with similar formats were used more frequently than other methods, with a mean of 3.70. The mean for using "questions in the same format as the final test" was slightly lower, at 3.50. In contrast, the use of commercially developed test preparation packages with formats parallel to the FT was significantly lower, with a mean of 3.10. This suggests that teachers prefer to use their own classroom tests and practice questions that mirror the FTs, familiarizing their students with this type of assessment.

As indicated in the table above, previous-form preparation ranks as the second most frequently used method, with a mean of 3.27. Prior-year test questions, which simulate the FTs, are most frequently employed as samples (M = 3.80), alongside using past tests to teach students how to handle test items (M = 3.40). This approach helps students understand how to approach similar questions. The last item has a relatively low mean (M = 2.60). This could be because not all teachers are responsible for the content of the FTs and may not have access to past tests, resulting in fewer students being introduced to these tests. These findings suggest that previous-form preparation is considered a practical and convenient method to help students prepare for upcoming tests. Clearly, the primary aim of using previous-form preparation is to familiarize students with the test format rather than the content. In comparison, the frequency of current-form preparation is slightly lower, with an average mean of 3.23 across three items, ranging from 2.90 to 3.50. Since current-form preparation involves activities closely aligned with the test, few teachers admit frequently giving students practice questions from the current test. As mentioned earlier, some teachers are required to prepare the FTs by the end of the course, which may result in their partial or full disclosure of the test content to students. Varied-format preparation exhibits the lowest frequency, with a mean score of 3.30, likely due to its perceived lower practicality and convenience compared to other methods. This indicates that teachers do not invest much time in preparing practice questions in varied formats. However, incorporating test content into various formats can yield more accurate assessments and better help students develop cognitive skills.

In summary, the most notable result from the data is that same-format and previous-format preparation activities are the most frequently used, primarily aiming to accustom students to the test format rather than the test content. Consequently, varied-format preparation receives the least attention.

+ *Test-wiseness training*: Table 2 below illustrates the frequency with which test-wiseness training is employed in GE classes. Overall, the data indicate that teachers have frequently engaged in test-wiseness training to prepare their students for the FTs, with a high average frequency ($M = 4.08$).

TABLE 2
FREQUENCY OF TEACHING TEST-WISENESS TRAINING

	n	minimum	maximum	mean	std. deviation
Test-wiseness training	10	2.63	4.75	4.0750	.62138

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
11. Teach students how to follow test directions.	10	4.50	.527
12. Discuss with students how to mark the answer sheet.	10	3.10	1.370
13. Show students how to use time efficiently to complete the test.	10	3.50	1.354
14. Teach students how to use deductive reasoning skills to eliminate distracters.	10	4.50	.707
15. Teach students some guessing strategies.	10	4.50	.707
16. Teach students how to avoid errors.	10	4.00	1.054
17. Talk to students about the purpose of the test (intent consideration).	10	4.00	.943
18. Teach students how to use clues to determine the answers.	10	4.50	.527

The data reveal that all teachers reported teaching students how to follow test directions and use clues to determine answers with very high frequency ($M = 4.50$). Notably, the standard deviation for these two items is significantly less than 1 on the 5-point Likert scale used in the questionnaire, indicating remarkable homogeneity within the population on these practices. A similar trend is observed for items 14 and 15, which involve teaching students how to use deductive reasoning to eliminate distractors and how to apply guessing strategies, both with a mean of 4.50 and a standard deviation of 0.707. Regarding error avoidance (16), seven out of ten teachers frequently incorporate this strategy into their test preparation, resulting in a mean of 4.00. Error avoidance involves careful test-taking practices and reviewing responses. Test-wiseness related to intent consideration (17), which involves understanding the test's purpose to better anticipate what to expect, received similar attention, also with a mean of 4.00. Remarkably, advice on time management receives less attention than other items, with a mean of 3.50, despite being a crucial element of test-taking. In practice, the time limit places significant pressure on test-takers, making tips on efficient time use essential in GE classes. Item 12, which involves demonstrating how to mark the answer sheet, shows significantly less frequency, with a mean of only 3.10. This is likely because, while useful, marking the answer sheet does not require much time or effort, and students accustomed to multiple-choice tests typically manage this task without difficulty. The data also indicate that 4 out of 10 respondents rarely or never address this issue with their students.

Overall, the results suggest that test-taking skills highlighted in the teaching material, which can compensate for students' lack of competence, are taught more frequently than those based on teachers' own experiences and practical teaching.

+ *Curriculum narrowing*: Table 3. below provides the results obtained from the preliminary analysis of curriculum narrowing. Generally speaking, the average mean value for this practice is 3.99, indicating a relative frequency.

TABLE 3
FREQUENCY OF TEACHING CURRICULUM NARROWING

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Curriculum narrowing	10	3.40	4.40	3.9900	.31073

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
19. Prepare objectives based on past items and teach accordingly.	10	3.90	.994
20. Use past tests to eliminate the already-tested content.	10	4.20	.789
21. Teach commonly-tested vocabulary (with meaning to answer MCQs, without focus on use or pronunciation).	10	3.50	1.080
22. Emphasize which materials are important for tests.	10	4.40	.699
23. Give instruction in mother tongue (ignore use of target language).	10	3.70	1.418
24. Focus on R+L (tested domain) and give little attention to communicate skills (S+W).	10	3.90	.994
25. Limit interactive activities (discussion, pair work, group work).	10	4.00	.943
26. Extensively review/ drill domain tested.	10	4.30	.675
27. Assign test-related homework/ extra materials to help prepare for the upcoming tests.	10	4.30	.675
28. Limit communicative game activities.	10	3.70	.949

Interestingly, the frequency of classroom activities related to curriculum narrowing exhibits two main trends: very high frequency ($M = 4.30-4.40$) and high frequency ($M = 3.50-4.20$). Although the primary goal of GE is to enhance students' language skills, particularly communication skills, classroom activities tend to focus predominantly on materials deemed important for the FT, extensive review sessions, drilling within the tested domain, and assigning test-related homework. These activities represent the highest frequency within the "curriculum narrowing" component. For item 22, the majority of respondents reported frequently emphasizing which materials are important for the test, resulting in the highest frequency ($M = 4.40$). This practice significantly narrows the curriculum but is perceived as practical and convenient for

teachers responsible for courses. Additionally, teachers tend to review or drill students extensively in the tested domain, also at a very high frequency (M = 4.30). This trend is further reflected in item 27, where incorporating test materials into homework or assignments reaches a mean of 4.30. This practice deliberately focuses students' time and effort on the tested content rather than fostering a broader set of communicative competencies. The remaining items fall into the high-frequency category, with means ranging from 3.50 to 4.20. As mentioned earlier, many teachers experience pressure related to their students' FT scores, leading most to use past test papers to narrow down the tested content (M = 4.20), prepare objectives based on previous test items (M = 3.90), and teach vocabulary commonly found on tests (M = 3.50). This indicates that teachers prioritize content likely to appear on the test. However, this result somewhat contradicts their response to item A6, "show students' past versions of the test so that they would know what to expect," which has a lower mean of 2.60. Regarding classroom activities, 9 out of 10 respondents admitted to limiting their students' engagement in interactive and communicative game activities, with means of 4.00 and 3.70, respectively. In terms of language skills, receptive skills are taught more frequently than productive skills, with a high mean of 3.90. To ensure students clearly understand instructions and explanations, teachers often use the students' mother tongue rather than the target language, with a mean value of 3.70. This practice is typically employed when explaining difficult vocabulary or problematic grammatical points to Vietnamese learners for testing purposes. In general, the results suggest a lack of consensus among various activities related to curriculum narrowing and test content and format. Notably, practices that encourage students to focus on the test receive more emphasis than communicative and interactive activities.

+ *Motivational activities*: Table 4. below illustrates how frequently teachers motivate their students to serve the purpose of testing. The results on the whole show a fairly high frequency for motivational activities (M=3.52).

TABLE 4
FREQUENCY OF TEACHING MOTIVATIONAL ACTIVITIES

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Motivational Activities	10	2.33	4.83	3.5167	.84419

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
29. Give students rewards for completing in- class/ sample tests with high scores.	10	2.90	1.524
30. Encourage attendance in the test week and provide rewards for high attendance (e.g. score bonus).	10	4.20	.789
31. Talk to students about the advantage of high-stake test scores for their future.	10	3.90	.994
32. Boost students' confidence for test (stress inoculation).	10	3.90	.994
33. Encourage students to eat good breakfast, get enough sleep, and be rested for the days of testing.	10	3.40	1.350
34. Use sample test report to identify students' strengths and weaknesses.	10	2.80	1.619

The results indicate significant variation in the frequency of classroom activities related to motivational strategies, which can be grouped into three main categories: fairly high frequency (M = 4.20), high frequency (M = 3.90), and medium frequency (M = 2.80–3.40). The item with the highest frequency is 30, with a mean value of 4.20, suggesting that the majority of teachers frequently encourage attendance during test week and offer rewards for high attendance, aiming to motivate students to attend class and prepare for the test. Items 31 and 32 exhibit the second-highest frequency, each reaching a mean of 3.90. Notably, these two items also share the same standard deviation (0.994), indicating a consensus among teachers on the importance of incentivizing class attendance through rewards, such as score bonuses, and helping students recognize the long-term benefits of doing well on tests. The final category, with medium frequency, includes items 29, 33, and 34, with means of 2.90, 3.40, and 2.80, respectively. It is noteworthy that the practice of exhortation, which includes advising students on healthy eating and resting before tests, receives relatively more attention, with a mean of 3.40. In tertiary education, it is generally assumed that university students are already aware of how to care for themselves and prepare physically for tests. In contrast, the other two items (29 and 34) show lower frequencies, with means of 2.90 and 2.80, respectively. The data suggest that extrinsic encouragement, such as rewarding high scores on midterm tests and using test reports to help students identify strengths and weaknesses, is not frequently applied.

Overall, the results show a higher frequency for activities designed to boost students' confidence and encourage attendance compared to those related to advice on health care and physical preparation. The following section provides a brief overview of how frequently the practices of 'teaching to the test' are utilized by the teacher respondents.

TABLE 5
SUMMARY OF THE EXTENT TO WHICH 'TEACHING TO THE TEST' IS EMPLOYED

Test-preparation teaching practices	Mean
1. Teaching content and format	3.31
2. Test-wiseness training	4.08
3. Curriculum narrowing	3.99
4. Motivational activities	3.52
M = 3.73	

In conclusion, the teachers have been extensively involved in various practices of teaching to the test, with a fairly high average frequency (M = 3.73). Notably, test-wiseness training is the most frequently employed practice, while teaching

content and format is utilized the least often. The following section provides a brief overview of how frequently these practices are utilized by the teacher respondents.

- *Findings from the interview*

To obtain a deeper and more nuanced understanding of teachers' perspectives on "teaching to the test", interviews were conducted with four participants: three aged 25–40 and one aged 45. To ensure anonymity, the participants were assigned codes: T1, T2, T3, and T4. The interview included four questions aimed at exploring their views on the practice of "teaching to the test," its impact on curriculum design and implementation, and the resulting washback effects.

+ *Teachers' perceptions of teaching to the test:* For all four teachers, the question, "*In what ways do you balance the focus on test preparation with the development of students' broader language skills?*" proved challenging to answer. This difficulty arises from the limited time available for the course—only 45 periods—which makes it challenging for teachers to simultaneously help students enhance their language proficiency and prepare effectively for the FTs. Despite the emphasis on high exam scores as the primary goal for most students, the teachers agreed that fostering both knowledge acquisition and practical skills is indispensable. They suggested that, given sufficient time, it would be possible to integrate test preparation with practical language applications by designing activities that align with the test format while also promoting real-world language use. For instance, T1 proposed incorporating test-based reading comprehension tasks with texts that reflect real-life contexts, such as articles or professional documents. T1 further emphasized the importance of "*lecturers encouraging communication practices.*" This could involve embedding tasks like role plays, group discussions, or debates into exam preparation sessions, which not only enhance listening and speaking skills but also indirectly support test readiness. Similarly, T2 advocated for a balanced approach, stating that "*teachers should combine test-focused training with comprehensive assessments.*" This might include supplementing test-related exercises with projects, presentations, or journal writing to evaluate students' broader linguistic competence, thereby encouraging authentic language use beyond the confines of test requirements. T3 expressed concern about the allocation of time for activities unrelated to test preparation. She suggested that teachers dedicate a portion of class time to exam-focused tasks while reserving the remainder for activities that develop broader skills, such as creative writing, storytelling, or listening to podcasts, which can enrich students' overall language acquisition. Unlike the aforementioned teachers, T4 focused on the integration of authentic materials. He highlighted that "*incorporating real-world resources, such as articles, interviews, or podcasts, alongside test preparation materials, can expose students to diverse contexts and help them practice language more effectively.*" Notably, all four teachers stressed the importance of fostering autonomous learning. They recommended guiding students to utilize independent language learning tools, such as online platforms, mobile applications, or language exchange programs, to supplement test preparation and enhance overall proficiency. This approach, they suggested, could help both teachers and students achieve a balance between preparing for exams and improving practical language abilities.

Regarding the question about curriculum design—"*How does 'teaching to the test' influence curriculum design and lesson planning in General English classes?*"—all teachers acknowledged that this practice significantly shapes both curriculum development and lesson planning. T1 highlighted the prioritization of test-specific content, including the narrowing of the curriculum and its alignment with the test format. Specifically, teachers tend to focus on material directly relevant to the exam, often excluding broader topics or skills that are not assessed. Lesson plans are typically structured around the test format, emphasizing the types of questions and tasks students are likely to encounter. T2 observed that "teaching to the test" dedicates a substantial portion of class time to practicing test-like exercises. For example, communicative tasks such as discussions, debates, or collaborative projects are often minimized in favor of preparing for FTs. From the perspective of teaching methods, T3 and T4 noted a tendency for instructors to prioritize test-taking strategies over communicative approaches. T3 also raised concerns about evaluation methods, stating that assessment often relies heavily on FT results, with limited emphasis on comprehensive or formative evaluation practices. T4 expressed concerns about the constraints on teacher autonomy. He argued that teachers are frequently compelled to design curricula within a test-focused framework, which restricts their ability to incorporate innovative or student-centered approaches. Additionally, there is considerable pressure on educators to meet performance metrics, which often forces them to closely align lesson plans with test preparation objectives. This, in turn, may stifle creativity and flexibility in teaching.

+ *Washback effects:* When discussing the potential long-term washback of the question, "*What are the potential long-term washback of a 'teaching to the test' approach for students' English proficiency and employability?*" all four teachers agreed that, while this approach may effectively improve short-term test scores, it can have significant long-term consequences on students' language proficiency and career prospects. T1 noted that "teaching to the test" restricts the development of students' language skills. Specifically, it may lead to proficiency in test-focused areas such as grammar, reading comprehension, and vocabulary while leaving students inadequately prepared in unassessed skills like speaking, listening, or creative writing. This emphasis on test-specific abilities often neglects the practical application of language, resulting in students who perform well in exams but struggle to communicate effectively in professional or social settings. T3 emphasized that when teaching and learning revolve around test scores, students' skills may not align with the demands of diverse work environments. Employers frequently prioritize communicative and practical language abilities, which are not sufficiently cultivated through test-focused instruction. This misalignment can hinder job performance and limit career advancement. In today's globalized job market, candidates with well-rounded language proficiency and cross-cultural

communication skills are often preferred, leaving students trained under test-centered approaches at a disadvantage. T2 and T4 highlighted an additional concern: students who associate English learning solely with exam preparation may develop a negative perception of language acquisition, reducing their motivation to continue learning once the test is over. This rigid focus on test-specific content may also inhibit the development of autonomous learning strategies necessary for adapting to evolving professional demands. T2 further observed that a test-focused environment can increase stress and diminish students' interest in the language, negatively impacting their long-term engagement with English. T4 added that "teaching to the test" undermines broader educational goals. Institutions that prioritize test performance may unintentionally devalue comprehensive language education, limiting their ability to produce well-rounded graduates. Consequently, students who graduate with inadequate practical skills may reflect poorly on their institution's educational quality, potentially affecting their reputation and employability.

With the question "*How might a shift away from test-focused instruction affect teaching practices and student outcomes in General English programs?*", the teachers noted that moving away from test-oriented teaching could lead to significant transformations in instructional methods and student outcomes, fostering a more comprehensive and meaningful language learning experience. T1 and T3 emphasized the potential adoption of communicative language teaching methods, which prioritize a learner-centered approach. According to T1, teachers could focus more on students' interests, needs, and goals, designing lessons that encourage active participation and personalized learning. She also highlighted the importance of integrating broader skill development, suggesting that teaching practices could expand to include creative writing, critical thinking, cross-cultural communication, and problem-solving tasks, thereby going beyond the narrow confines of test preparation. T3 addressed the potential for greater flexibility in curriculum design, noting that the absence of test-based constraints would allow educators to innovate, tailor content to students' proficiency levels, and explore diverse teaching strategies. T2 and T4 discussed the potential impact on student learning outcomes. They argued that a broader curriculum would enable students to develop balanced skills, equipping them to use English effectively across various contexts. Additionally, students could gain greater confidence and fluency in real-world communication, preparing them for professional, academic, and social interactions. T2 noted that moving away from repetitive test preparation could make learning English more engaging and relevant, fostering intrinsic motivation to improve. T4 further asserted that emphasizing meaningful language use rather than rote memorization could promote deeper learning and long-term proficiency. Despite the potential advantages, all four teachers expressed concerns about the challenges and risks of eliminating "teaching to the test". First, both faculty and students accustomed to test-oriented instruction may resist changes, given uncertainties about how to measure success without standardized test results. Second, transitioning away from test-focused methods would require alternative assessment tools, such as portfolios, project-based evaluations, or presentations, which may be more complex to design and implement. Third, the absence of structured test preparation could hinder some students' ability to achieve high scores on standardized exams, which are often critical for graduation or employment opportunities. Finally, a less structured, non-test-focused approach might benefit students unevenly, as those with varying levels of self-discipline or motivation may struggle to adapt.

In summary, while the teachers acknowledged the benefits of moving away from "teaching to the test," they also recognized the associated challenges, particularly under the constraints of limited time and the pressure to achieve high scores. As a result, most teachers continue to prioritize exam preparation, aligning with the expectations and goals of the majority of students.

B. Discussion

+ *Extent of teaching to the test:* Quantitative data indicate that "teaching to the test" is widely implemented across various components, including test content and format, test-wiseness training, curriculum narrowing, and motivational activities. Teachers frequently employed test-wiseness strategies ($M = 4.08$), such as teaching guessing and error-avoidance techniques, aligning with findings from Mahmood et al. (2022) on the emphasis on specific testing skills. These skills and strategies do not replace thorough test preparation; however, having them can assist students in achieving a high score (Barnes & Fives, 2020; McConlogue, 2020). Narrowing the curriculum ($M = 3.99$) is another prominent trend, as teachers prioritize materials critical for final exams while reducing activities that foster communication and interaction skills. This trend echoes the perspectives of Koo (2020), who argues that such practices often overlook broader language development. Conversely, less emphasis was placed on motivational strategies and varied-format preparation, suggesting a predominant focus on practices directly linked to achieving high test scores. This observation aligns with Phelps (2011), who stressed that narrowing instructional content to meet test requirements undermines comprehensive language learning.

+ *Teachers' perceptions of teaching to the test:* Responses from the interview questions offered valuable insights into teachers' perspectives. While teachers acknowledged the practicality of adapting lessons to test formats, they also expressed concerns about its impact on students' broader cognitive and linguistic development. For instance, T1 and T4 highlighted the limitations of curriculum narrowing, reflecting Brown's (2005) concern regarding the exclusion of essential language competencies. Teachers noted that while test-focused teaching aids students in mastering test-specific skills, it often fails to develop practical language and communication abilities (Berman & Cheng, 2001). Moreover, the relatively low emphasis on motivational and diverse preparation strategies underscores a dominant focus on practices that prioritize immediate test performance over long-term skill acquisition. This observation, again, aligns with Phelps (2011), who cautioned that such instructional narrowing undermines comprehensive language learning.

+ *Washback effects*: Teacher interview responses also highlighted concerns about the negative effects of test-oriented teaching, such as its potential to demotivate students and narrow their perception of English learning. As Alderson and Wall (1993) emphasized, the interaction between contextual and individual factors plays a pivotal role in shaping resistance, which can either facilitate or hinder meaningful language acquisition. Indeed, while the "teaching to the test" approach may enhance short-term test performance, it often adversely affects students' long-term English proficiency and employability. Such findings underscore the need for a balanced instructional approach that integrates test preparation with broader language skill development.

V. CONCLUSION

Findings:

Results from the survey and interview responses indicate that while the "teaching to the test" approach can temporarily help students achieve higher scores, it often hinders the development of comprehensive and proactive language skills. Specifically, teachers tend to focus heavily on test-taking strategies, prioritizing exam-specific content over interactive and communicative activities. Many teachers also expressed concerns regarding the long-term consequences of this approach, particularly its adverse effects on students' future employability and real-world language competencies.

Despite recognizing these challenges, educators acknowledge the pressures imposed by high-stakes testing and the limited time available for broader skill development. To address these issues, it is essential to adopt a balanced teaching approach that integrates test preparation with activities designed to foster holistic language acquisition. Achieving this balance requires collaboration between educational administrators and teachers to adjust curricula, explore alternative assessment methods, and implement innovative, student-centered instructional strategies.

Furthermore, administrators must avoid placing excessive emphasis on teacher evaluations based solely on student test scores. Over-reliance on this metric risk creating an environment where teachers feel compelled to prioritize exam performance at the expense of fostering well-rounded, meaningful language skills. Instead, a more comprehensive evaluation framework should be adopted - one that encourages practices aimed at preparing students not only for exams but also for long-term academic, professional, and personal success.

Implications:

The findings of this study highlight both the challenges and opportunities associated with "teaching to the test" in English language teaching. Educational managers and higher education institutions can utilize these insights to develop strategies that enable teachers to achieve a balance between exam preparation and comprehensive language skills training. Furthermore, educational institutions in Vietnam and beyond can adopt globally relevant approaches to integrating test-specific knowledge with communicative competencies. The study also underscores the importance of mitigating the negative impacts of test-oriented teaching, which remains a significant concern for education systems worldwide.

Limitations & Recommendations for future research:

Encountering some limitations of this study is unavoidable. The study is limited by its small sample size and its focus on a single university in Vietnam, which constrains the generalizability of its findings. To address these limitations, future research could expand the scope by including a larger and more diverse sample across multiple educational institutions or regions. Such comparative studies would enable researchers to identify differences and similarities in English teaching practices. Additionally, future research could investigate the long-term impacts of "teaching to the test" on students' language proficiency and career opportunities. Broadening the scale and scope of research would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of this instructional approach and its implications for education systems globally.

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Dang Thi Bao Dung is currently a lecturer at Can Tho University of Technology, Vietnam. She holds a Master's degree in TESOL from Victoria University, Australia, and a Ph.D. in Contrastive Linguistics from the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Vietnam. Her research interests include language skills, teaching methodologies, test-preparation instruction, and the interplay between language and culture. Her published research encompasses both language teaching and linguistics. Email: dtbdung@ctuet.edu.vn. ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8194-8975>



Tran Thanh Du is majoring both in TESOL methodologies and in Contrastive Linguistics. He is currently a lecturer and also the head of the Institute of Foreign Language Training at Thu Dau Mot University in Viet Nam. He takes his interests in studies of linguistics, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, learner motivation and English language teaching methodologies. All of his published works are related to both linguistic studies and TESOL-related issues. He endeavours to improve language use in general as well as English language teaching and learning in global contexts. Email: dutt@tdmu.edu.vn ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-7802-9949>



Le Van Lanh is currently a lecturer at Can Tho University of Technology, Vietnam. He holds a Master's degree in Theories and Methods of Teaching and a Master's degree in Business Administration. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Theories and Methods of Teaching. His research interests include teaching methodologies, language skills, test-preparation instruction, as well as the relationship between language and culture. His published research focuses on teaching methodologies and cultural studies. Email: lvlanh@ctuet.edu.vn ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-8684-4740>



Nguyen Huu The is a Doctor of Contrastive Linguistics. He is currently a lecturer at Faculty of the Foreign Languages, Ba Ria - Vung Tau College of Education, Viet Nam. His major areas of expertise are TESOL and Contrastive linguistics. His research interests are linguistics, semantics, stylistics, pragmatics and English language teaching methodologies. All of his published works are related to both linguistic studies and TESOL-related issues. Email: huuthcdsp@gmail.com ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-2075-6793>