



The washback effect of the general aptitude test on students' attitudes and their learning of Arabic

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Abstract

Many educational bureaucracies use national examinations for high-stake decision-making including certification, promotion, and qualifications. This study examines the washback effect of one of those exams, known as the General Aptitude Test (GAT), on the students' learning of the Arabic language. Specifically, it examines students' perceptions of the GAT and how it impacted their learning practice. Based on questionnaire responses from 548 high school students, and 12 interviews, the study finds a negative washback effect on students' perceptions and learning. Most students expressed negative views about the GAT as it causes stress, and they perceive that it is a barrier to their university admission. In terms of using the GAT results, findings reveal that many students did not change their learning due to the mismatch between test content, learning, and teaching activities. This study provides important evidence about students' perceptions of and influence of GAT on their learning. We discuss the implications of these findings in minimizing the negative washback effect.

Keywords: General Aptitude Test; Students' Attitude; Washback effect

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1. INTRODUCTION

Many educational bureaucracies use national examinations for high-stake decision-making including certification (Cedefop, 2010; Holme et al., 2010), promotion, and qualifications (Cheng, 2005; Ferman, 2004). The Ministry of Education of Saudi Arabia has developed several national exams in the last few decades, claiming that such exams can bring change to education in general by monitoring standards across the regions, measuring students' abilities against other students, and selecting students for further education. Among these exams developed and used is the General Aptitude Test (GAT) which has been recognized as a reliable and valid instrument to assess university students' knowledgeability in math and Arabic language. The GAT is administered for high school students where they should obtain a high point (i.e., more than 80%) if they want to get into university and more than 90% if they want to study in-demand majors such as medical sciences.

Although national examinations are prevalent in many educational bureaucracies, there are competing views about the functions and impacts of these national exams. Many educators supported the implementation of such exams for determining students' entry level to the university, raising stockholders' awareness towards the importance of education (parents become more aware of their children's education), and reforming the teaching and learning of School subjects (Cheng, 2004; Cheng et al., 2011; Sideridis & Jaffari 2023; Lim & Tan 2021). Further, with the result of the national examination, parents can know the best school to choose for their children. For instance, if a school's graduation level is high, parents will choose that school to prepare their children for these exams. Other researchers claim that these exams limit students' entry to the university, burdening them (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011; Embretso, 2023). They believe that such exams are not fair and useless since after all students have spent almost twelve years studying at school and finally, they are only assessed by the final examinations. For many students, these exams are not easy and many of them feel stressed and afraid of being failed in getting high scores (Rahman et al., 2021). Others believe that these exams are established to eliminate students' admission to the university, only those who received a good education can get admitted to the universities (Walpole et al., 2005; Kaplan-Rakowski et al., 2021).

Reported studies investigating the washback effect so far have mainly focused on high-stakes exams and their impacts on teachers' and learners' attitudes and their teaching and learning practice in the English language learning and teaching context. Yet, as Saudi Arabia introduced the GAT for university entry-level qualifications, there was no study reported about its impact on students' perceptions and actual learning. Therefore, our study aims to examine the washback effect of GAT on the student's learning of the Arabic language. Specifically, it examines students' perceptions of the GAT and how it impacted their learning. We sought to answer the following research questions:

1. How do Saudi Arabian students perceive the use of **the** General Aptitude Test?
2. What are the washback effects of the General Aptitude Test on students' learning?

1.1. Literature review

1.1.1. *The Saudi Arabia educational system*

The structure of the Saudi formal school system comprises a total of twelve years: six years at the primary level, three at the secondary level, and three years at the high level. Tertiary education varies from four to seven years, depending on the course. In the past, before 2000, gaining admission to higher education institutions was fairly straightforward. Students needed to complete only the required application and submit their General Secondary Education Certificate, which the exam students took at the end of the third year of high school. Some programs were more competitive and required certain scores. However, since the launching

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of the new educational reforms in 2000, including new curriculum and assessment, all high school students are required to sit for two national exams, known as the General Aptitude Test (GAT) and Academic Achievement Test for Scientific Specializations (SAAT). These two exams have become major requirements for university entry with the General Secondary Education Certificate. The weight allocated to these exams as an admission requirement varies from one university to another. These national exams are held by one of the biggest assessment centers in the world, The National Center for Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, known as QIYAS. Students can take these exams in Grades 10 and 11 and have five attempts within three years. All questions in the tests are multiple-choice, and tests are machine-scored (QIYAS, 2022).

As this paper focuses on the GAT, it is important to give an overview of it here. The GAT, also locally known as "Qudorat", targets secondary school graduates who plan to pursue further education at the university level. It focuses on students' ability to learn Arabic language and science. The test has two main sections: verbal and quantitative. The verbal section measures student's ability in reading comprehension, sentence completion, analogies, contextual error, and relationships and differences between words. The quantitative section measures students' abilities in science including arithmetic, geometry, algebra, and statistics. The test length is two hours, is conducted twice a year, and is offered in two languages, Arabic and English.

1.1.2. Washback Effects of Assessment

Standardized testing has been found to affect teaching, learning, and content, known as washback or backwash. Washback is referred to as "the influence of testing on teaching and learning" (Barnes, 2017). Park (2018) defines washback as "the degree of behavioral change for teachers and learners resulting from the introduction and use of tests". The change can be at both micro and macro levels. At the micro-level, washback affects language learning and teaching in a classroom setting. In contrast, at the macro level, it affects the entire education system, including stakeholders (e.g., teachers, and students), curriculum, and administration (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Chan, 2018). The effect of washback can be positive or negative (Alderson and Wall, 1993). Positive washback occurs when teaching the intended curriculum becomes the same as teaching to a particular test (Taylor, 2005). Negative washback occurs when there is a mismatch between the curricular objectives and the focus of the test (Brown, 2004). Researchers have perceived washback as the link between testing, teaching, and learning and used it as a tool for educational reform (Bailey, 1999; Barnes, 2017; Shohamy, 1992) because it has a clear influence on both teaching (how teachers teach) and learning (how learners learn) and curriculum (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Messick, 1996).

Most research has focused on examining the effects of washback on language teaching and learning, including on teachers' and students' perceptions, teaching methods, and learning practice (Cheng, 2004; Tsang, 2017; Watanabe, 2000; Wall, 2005) and curriculum (Cheng, 2005; Kılıçkaya, 2016; Onaiba & Mustafa, 2014). For example, in terms of research on teaching methods, Shohamy et al., (1996) examined how the national exams impacted teacher teaching practice in Israel. They observed how teachers teach low- (Arabic exam) and high-stakes exams (English foreign language exam) and found no change in teachers' teaching for the low-stakes exam. However, when teaching the high-stakes exam, teachers changed their teaching methods: they used simulation tasks and various activities to develop skills needed for the exam.

Similarly, studies by Burrows (2004) and Read and Hayes (2003) on the effect of washback on teaching methods in New Zealand and Australia reveal that teachers were teaching to the test: the classroom activities were based on the exams, with the teachers' using materials that

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mimicked the format of tests, and providing more explanation for answering the exam questions, and the exams had an effect outside the classroom activities with student homework also related to the exams. Kilickaya (2016) investigated the practice of secondary school teachers and how the national exams affected their teaching in Turkey and found that many teachers made changes to their teaching behavior after the introduction of the standardized local exams, including in classroom activities (tasks were based on exams), teaching methods (more practice on the tests) and teaching strategies (developing test-taking strategies).

Researchers have also investigated the effects of washback on students' attitudes and learning behavior (Barnes, 2016; Cheng, 1998; Cheng, et al., 2011; Park, 2018). For example, Cheng's (2005) investigation on the effect of the revised national exam in Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, on student attitudes and their learning style shows that, although students worked hard in studying for the exam, they were not in favor of it and believed that the exam was not accurately reflecting all aspects of their study. In a large-scale study, Dong et al., (2021) examined the impact of the National Matriculation English Test on 3,105 Chinese students' learning process. They found that the test had a significant effect on students' learning and their attitudes. Students cared more about the exam and spent significant time practicing it.

The exam also negatively impacted them by increasing their anxiety level. From the African context, Gashaye (2021) recently examined the effect of the Ethiopian National English Examination (ENEE) on students' learning and also found that students were studying for the exam: they focused on the skills needed for scoring higher in the ENEE by practicing speaking, doing more grammar exercises, and focusing on technical aspects of writing. Furthermore, an examination by Ren (2011) and Zhan and Andrews (2014) on the effect of the revised College English Test Band 4 (CET-4) on Chinese university students reveals that students spend significant time studying exam materials such as memorizing lists of words and doing past exam papers. These exams also bring several psychological issues to students by putting them under pressure and causing worry and anxiety (Choi, 2008; Myers et al., 2021). Recently, Polat (2020) also investigated the washback effect of the Higher Education Exam on 1617 students in Turkey and found that the test had negative washback effects on students' attitudes as it caused anxiety, stress, and a study burden.

Other studies have focused on the effect of washback on the curriculum, looking at how the course content, materials, and tasks changed after the introduction of standardized exams. This focus on content and skills relevant to the exams (while ignoring those that are not assessed) may have negative impacts on student learning and, therefore, on language competency. For example, the changes after the introduction of the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) in China reveal that teachers paid more attention to some skills (reading skills) because they had the heaviest weighting on the NMET while ignoring others. Studies by Alderson and Wall (1993) and Kilickaya (2016) also show how teachers planned to develop students' writing and reading skills while paying less time and attention to listening and speaking, as the latter were not assessed in the national exams. Regarding exam preparation, researchers (Allen, 2016; Read & Hayes, 2003) argue that standardized exam preparation impacts students' learning; students who prepare well score higher in the skills assessed in the national exams. However, Green's (2007) study shows the opposite result. In his examination of the effect of test preparation on improving students' academic writing scores in IELTS testing, he found no clear advantage for focused test preparation.

Furthermore, research has also investigated the effect of washback on classroom activities and course content. Cheng's (2005) study of the effect of the HKCEE on course classroom activities reveals that teachers made changes in-class activities, for instance, replacing reading

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aloud with role-play and group discussion activities, to prepare students for the exam. Lam's (1993) examination of two sets of textbooks in Hong Kong reveals that most of the assessed textbooks were exam-oriented, containing exercises and examples similar to the national exam format.

1.2. Purpose of study

This literature review shows that many studies have examined the impact of standardized exams on the teaching and learning of the English language and its curriculum in the global context. They show that there is a change in teachers' teaching methods and learners' learning behaviors and course content about exams. A relationship is observed between teachers' teaching methods, learners' learning behaviors, course content, and the demands of exams. In the Saudi context, after the introduction of the standardized national exam, the present study thus proposes that this GAT exam could impact students' perceptions and their learning of the Arabic language (what they study and how). Building on previous studies, this paper aims to contribute to understanding the effects of washback from the GAT, on high school students' perceptions and learning practice.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

To achieve the aim of the study, a mixed-methods approach (questionnaire and interview) was used to examine students' perceptions of GAT and its effect on their learning of the Arabic language in high schools in Saudi Arabia.

2.1. Participants

This study took place at 15 high schools in the capital city of Saudi Arabia, Riyadh. These public schools use Arabic as the medium of instruction, where all subjects are taught in Arabic. All the students are Saudis and speak Arabic as their first language. The students are required to take the GAT in their second and third years of high school to enroll at universities. From these schools, 548 students were selected randomly, whose ages ranged from 16 to 18 years old. Due to gender segregation in education in Saudi Arabia, this study includes male students only. Unfortunately, gender prioritization is common in some parts of the world; thereby having more males admitted into higher institutions (Zhang & Chen 2014).

The Department of Education identified several schools randomly with a written document showing the purpose of the study and their permission to conduct this study. One of the researchers went to these schools and met the principals to get in contact with teachers who teach second and third-year classes. Then, he met the teachers at their classes talked about the study and its purpose, and asked their permission to distribute the questionnaires to the students. Recruitment of student participants was done by teachers. They explained the purpose of the study and informed them that their participation was voluntary, they could withdraw anytime, and it would not impact their academic performance. Then, they distributed the questionnaires, which contained the participant information sheet and the consent form. Students were asked also if anyone was interested in participating in interviews to further explore their views about GAT. A meeting for the interview was scheduled for those who signed up.

2.2. Data collection instrument

A questionnaire was constructed based on previous studies (Cheng,1997; Hoque, 2011) to understand students' perceptions of the GAT and its impact on their learning style. The first part of the questionnaire comprises demographic information, followed by three sections consisting of 27 items seeking information on 1) their perceptions towards the GAT (I think GAT is important for my academic future); 2) their learning style (I made changes in my

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learning style after the introduction of GAT); and 3) learning activities (I read previous exam papers). The questionnaire uses a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree) and frequency scales (commonly, sometimes, and rarely). Before the actual data collection, a pilot test was conducted on seven students for face validity. Also, we sought comments from three teachers for expert review. This process contributed to the rigor of the study and to avoiding any potential problems (ambiguous and confusing questions). Based on their feedback and comments, the questionnaires were modified accordingly.

To triangulate and elaborate on the information provided in the questionnaire (Holloway & Galvin, 2016), a semi-structured interview was conducted with 12 students individually. The interview has three main sections: students' perceptions, changes in learning behavior, and learning activities. The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted for about 14 minutes each. To maintain the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, codes consisting of letters and numbers were used ([S-5], 'S' refers to 'student', and '5' indicates the participant/interview number, that is, 'student/interview 5').

2.3. Data analysis

Upon the completion of data collection, data obtained from the questionnaires were analyzed quantitatively using SPSS software version 11. Then, descriptive and comparative analyses using frequencies and percentages were employed to bring objectivity to the results (Punch, 2013). Interview data were firstly transcribed and then translated, and they were then analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2006). This entailed interpreting the meaning from the content of the interviews and allowing key themes and patterns to emerge with detailed descriptions of the data.

3. RESULTS

The study presents the results of our study following the order of our research questions starting with students' perceptions and then the effect of washback on their learning behaviors.

3.1. Students' perception of GAT

Students have different perceptions about GAT. When asked about the importance of the GAT test, students expressed varying attitudes. Many students believed that the test is important for high school students, with 40% (21% SA and 19% A) agreeing with the item, "GAT is an important test for high school students". More than a third (35%) of the students disagreed with that item (12% D and 23% SD) and a quarter (25%) were not sure (see Table 1).

Table 1

Students' Perceptions of the GAT (N=548)

Statements	SA	A	N	D	SD
I think the GAT is an important national exam	21	19	25	12	23
I feel frustrated when getting a low score	52	21	16	5	6
I feel stressed during the exam	42	22	19	9	8
I felt pressure from my family during the exam	27	18	15	21	19
The GAT result affects my academic future	25	23	23	19	10
I care about The GAT more than the regular tests	28	21	19	19	13
The GAT helps in develop my Arabic language	16	17	26	19	22

Note: SA= Strongly Agree, A= Agree, N=Neutral, D=Disagree, SD= Strongly Disagree

When asked how they felt about the GAT, many students (48%, 25 SA, and 23 A) felt that the test plays a significant role in determining their academic future, for entering university, and this is why many of them care about the test more than their academic courses (49%, 28% SA and 21% A). The analysis also shows that the test has brought several psychological problems to the students, causing frustration when getting low scores (73%, 52% SA and 21% A), anxiety and stress (64%, 42% SA and 22% A), and pressure from the family (45%, 27% SA, 18% A). On the question about the role of the test in developing students' Arabic language, *Fusha*, the students' responses show that the test has little effect on developing their language (33%, 16% SA and 17% A). In comparison, 41% of the students (22% SD and 19% D) disagreed with the statement, "The GAT helps in developing my *Fusha*". The students' responses to the item on whether the test achieves justice among the students were mainly negative. Most of them (56%, 36% SD, and 20% D) believed that the test brings injustice to the students, as it determines their performance of the twelve years of schooling in one exam.

However, the interview results contrast with the questionnaire findings. The majority of the interviewed students expressed negative attitudes towards the test, with only a few supporting the GAT for its importance for students' academic future and achieving justice among high school graduates, as S-5 and S-9 expressed:

I think the exam is important for determining students' academic future and achieving justice among students. I mean, no one enters the university if they have not achieved the required scores. [S-5];

I think the test is important as it shows the students' knowledge and language ability at this level. [S-9]

Yet, this sentiment was not common across the students' responses. Many of the interviewed students were not in favor of the administration of this test. They believed that the test is not important and is administered to limit students' entry to university, and thus it presents as an obstacle in their way to higher-level study, as expressed in the following examples:

The test is unimportant, and I feel it is like an obstacle on our way to the university. If we do not achieve a high score, more than 77%, we will not get accepted into the preferred university programs. [S-1];

Although I achieved a high score on this test (97%), I do not support such exams as they stand as obstacles in many students' academic lives, many of them cannot get a good result and thus, they cannot get a place at the university. [S-3]

I get frustrated when getting a low score. I think the test does not accurately measure students' academic levels and reflects their ability and performance over 12 years. [S-10]

The students also raised two issues relating to the test: the test time allocated and test questions (i.e., difficult questions). Firstly, many students indicated that the time allotted for the test was insufficient, as they didn't have enough time to answer the analytical questions confidently. S-1 and S-7 commented:

The time is short and the test has many questions, including higher-order skills questions that require thinking skills that we're not used to. This does not help us to finish all the questions in the allocated time". [S-1];

The test is very difficult. It has many questions that I am not familiar with. These questions required longer time and thinking. [S-7].

Secondly, many students commented on the question types and format. They felt that these questions were difficult and they were not familiar with them as they required thinking and analytical skills that they were not used to in the classroom:

I found the test difficult the first time. I could not answer the questions. I did not understand them. They require thinking and analysis skills which are different from what we used to, relying on memorisation. I think the test needs strategies, more preparation, and practice. [S-4];

This exam is not clear to me, it does not have specific materials to study for it. I do not know how to study for it, no specific strategy for achieving a high result. I do not understand its questions. This is why I got low scores. [S-6]

Interestingly, one of the students, S-5, was more objective and clarified the problem of many Ss having low scores. S-5 explained:

"The GAT is important [but] the problem is that [students] are not familiar with the type of the questions. Through primary and elementary schools, [students] just relied heavily on memorization, but now, [they] are required rather to understand, and in the test, they need to have thinking and analytical skills. This is why [they] encounter difficulties. Also, there is no focus on this exam in the classroom: what is being taught in the classroom is different from exam content".

3.2. Washback effects on students' learning

When asked about the impact of the GAT on students' learning, the analysis also shows varied results. For example, in their responses to the question of whether they made any changes in their learning style after the introduction of the GAT, 45% of the students responded negatively. In comparison, some (32%) indicated that they had made some changes. The changes they made, as illustrated in Table 2, included learning from mistakes in the exam (71%), studying previous exam papers (69%), and preparing for the exam, e.g., studying questions similar to the exam format (61%), and studying materials that designed especially for the GAT (47%).

Table 2
Washback on Students' Learning

Statements	Commonly	Sometimes	Never
I learn from previous mistakes in the test	71	15	14
I study previous exam papers	69	16	15
I make a double effort when studying for the GAT (e.g., practicing)	61	18	21
I learned a lot from the materials designed for the GAT	47	18	35
Teachers' teaching methods help me score high in the GAT	33	21	46
My teachers explain the vocabulary that is similar to that in the GAT	32	24	44
I changed my learning style after the GAT	32	23	45
The teachers align the content to the test	29	24	47

On the question related to the role of teachers in preparing students for the GAT, many Ss (47%) indicated that their teachers do not link the content to the exam in the classroom and never give examples or explain new words or vocabulary similar to those in the GAT, during the class (44%). The qualitative results also support the quantitative data, with varied responses. Many of the interviewed students indicated that they changed their learning behaviors after the introduction of the GAT particularly after getting a low result. These changes are seen in studying previous exam papers and taking GAT preparation courses to

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understand how to answer the GAT questions and what strategies they need. These responses can be seen in the following:

Yes, I made some changes to my learning habits after the first trial of the exam, where I got a lower score. I was disappointed and demotivated. Thus, I started studying previous exam papers, though I feel it does not help. [S-2];

I studied previous exam papers and took some preparation courses for the GAT. Those courses give orientation about the exam and teach the strategies needed for answering the GAT questions. [S-3];

I usually read books published for the GAT with questions answers and explanations. [S-10].

Other Students highlighted some critical ways to score higher on the GAT. They believed that background about the exam and its questions would help them get a high score. They also thought that reading habits, such as reading Arabic materials such as stories and novels, is the best way to enrich students' vocabulary knowledge, enabling them to answer the exam questions correctly. One of the students got a high score on this test because of his reading habit and recommended other students to do the same:

I read Arabic materials such as novels and short stories. I think this helps me to develop my vocabulary knowledge and enables me to answer the exam questions correctly and efficiently. I would suggest my classmates to follow this strategy. [S-7];

Another student indicated that, in addition to reading a lot in Arabic, he used early preparation, such as practicing for the exam, as a strategy for getting a high score:

I found reading and preparing early for the exam are good strategies for getting a high score. [S-4]

However, many students frequently talked about the mismatch between the test content and what they were studying. They indicated that they do not need to study for the GAT, as the exam has no specific materials and depends on students' background knowledge of Arabic. Thus, they do not make changes in their learning:

Honestly, I did not change my learning strategies because the exam was different from what we studied in the previous years, and there were no specific materials to study. [S-4];

Studying for the GAT is wasting time because nothing there can be studied. But I think studying previous exam papers is the best way to get a high score. [S-5];

I did not prepare or study for the GAT, as I believe that students get high marks by chance. [S-12].

These results do not provide a clear-cut direction on students' learning behavior: some did, and others did not make any changes in their learning; and, regardless, changes in their learning and activities were considered just to for scoring higher in the GAT exam. In other words, they were learning for the test, reflecting a negative washback effect. This also shows an absence of a positive or negative washback effect on teaching.

4. DISCUSSION

Overall, there are several noteworthy findings revealed in this study. First, students have different perceptions of the washback effects of GAT. While many students think that the test is important for their future (40%), more than a third of them (35%) do not find it useful. However, the interview findings showed a negative washback where many students perceived the test negatively and thought it was established to limit their entry to university. This aligns with Cheng's (2005) findings where many Hong Kong students viewed the national exam, the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, negatively as they believed it was not accurately reflecting their academic knowledge and abilities.

Second, we have identified reasons for students' negative perceptions. They emphasized how the test questions were challenging and unclear for them. This difficulty was clarified by their comments on the unfamiliarity with the test questions and format, raising a question on the alignment between the test and instructions. This finding adds evidence to Shohamy's (2001) view about high-stakes tests that they "can create winners and losers, successes and failures, rejections and acceptances. In addition, most of the students in the present study experienced high levels of stress and anxiety and feelings of frustration when getting a lower score. These feelings are also observed in previous research findings (Burgucu et al., 2011; Dong et al., 2021) where students globally have experienced anxiety and stress as a result of standardized exams, leading to poor performance and outcomes. Such views on the importance of these tests and how the students perceive them are also found in previous research findings (Cheng, 1998; 2005; Polat, 2020), showing the negative effect of standardized testing on student attitudes.

Third, we have found out that GAT has no positive influence on students' learning behavior. Data show that many students did not change their learning style after the introduction of the GAT because they found what they learned in the classroom was different from the exam content. More specifically, when students were asked about their reaction to the test and how it impacted their learning, the findings showed negative washback. Although some students indicated that they made some changes to their learning (i.e., studying last exam papers, taking preparation courses), these changes were made for the sake of the test. Also, most of the students reported that they had not made changes to their learning after the result of the GAT. They believed that there was no way to study for this test and that what was taught in the class was not relevant to the content of the test (i.e., the exam requires analytical and critical thinking skills that are different from what students are used to in the classroom, memorization). As claimed by McKinley and Thompson (2018), negative washback occurs when there is a mismatch between the stated goals of instruction and the focus of the test; the result of this study suggests a mismatch between the curriculum, teaching method, and assessment. This would result in a negative washback. Understanding these factors and how they work together is vital in this context to promote positive washback, which, in turn, contributes to the quality of education.

Finally, our findings also found that teachers have no role in making decisions or even in preparing students for the GAT. Unlike teachers in other studies who used their classroom materials and activities to support students and prepare them for national exams (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Cheng, 2005), the findings of the present study suggest a lack of conscious effort of teachers to adapt their teaching to help support students. It seems that they are not sure or have very little knowledge about this assessment system and have no role in shaping decisions about the content being assessed by the GAT. Such findings raise questions about the effect of the GAT on teachers' attitudes and its impact on their teaching practices in the classroom.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, our study makes an important contribution to the field of language testing and assessment by examining the effects of standardized examinations on learners' perceptions and their learning behavior of languages other than English, and Arabic. However, to have a clear picture of the students' perceptions and their learning experience of Arabic, a large number of schools need to be included from different cities across the country. Also, as this study included male students only, female students can be included to gain a more balanced perspective on the GAT and its impacts on learning and teaching in this context.

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In addition, our study reveals significant findings that can serve to make changes in the teaching and learning of Arabic in Saudi Arabian high schools and help decision-makers use the GAT national exam as a reference point to reform the teaching and learning of Arabic. The outcome of using such an exam as a power to generate positive washback for education is dependent on a few factors. To change the learner's learning, we need to change the assessment system; thus, policymakers and decision-makers in the Saudi education system can use the power of these national exams to change students' learning and behaviors. This can be achieved through creating students' awareness about the test. Students need to understand the importance of the test to their future, its content, format, and how to prepare for it to get satisfactory outcomes.

Furthermore, the findings indicate teachers' absence role in making decisions and implementing this exam. Teachers appear to have no role in helping and preparing students for the test or at least in creating positive attitudes toward the test. They also have no part in designing or deciding about the test, as seen in their practice in the classroom where they appear not even to be talking about the test to their students. Thus, there is a need to create awareness of the importance of the GAT and to involve them in decision-making about the test and the related curriculum. They need to be empowered in the school to take responsibility for their students' learning concerning this important exam. Such findings thus raise questions about the effects of the GAT on teachers' attitudes and its impact on their teaching practices in the classroom, which can be investigated in future research. As seen in previous research, teachers have a significant role in preparing students for such tests and making them aware of their importance. However, some of the teaching practices in this regard have been perceived negatively. Thus, their voices need to be heard and shared when designing such important tests and related curricula.

Finally, as found in this study, the lack of alignment between the curriculum, teaching method, and assessment is an important issue that can hinder positive washback from the standardized exams, which thus must be subject to further scrutiny in future research on this context i.e., Saudi Arabia. Examinations can impact course content and materials with a positive washback effect.

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