

# **A Study of a Wash-back Effect of the High-Stakes National Examination for Students in Indonesian Secondary Schools**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The National Examination (UN) policy has been a public debate among educational practitioners and policy makers in Indonesia of recent times. Those who oppose the UN argue that there is an inherent ‘injustice’ in applying one examination within a subject area across the whole of the country, the results from which will ultimately impact on the students’ future life. The injustice is largely due to the discrepancies that exist in quality among schools across Indonesia. Critics also cite the many negative impacts of a UN upon teachers, students, parents, as well as the curriculum itself.

The government is keen to pursue UN as a means of evaluating the results of teaching and learning processes across the country. It is claimed that the results of UNs will form important input and feedback to the government for the continued improvement of educational outputs.

This qualitative study tried to investigate teachers’ voices in terms of their perceived wash-back of the UN. The analysis of in-depth interviews done with 6 English teachers as participants of the study shows that the UN has led teachers to teach to the test, made the teachers as well as students feel stressed and under pressure; pushed the students to engage in cheating; and got the curriculum narrowed. The teachers also urged for changes to current rules on ‘completion’ of high school, and concerned with the relevance of the test to university admission requirements.

**Key Words:** *Wash-back effect, High-stakes testing, National Examination*

## **1. Introduction**

National Examination (UN) policy as a national standardized testing for secondary (lately also for primary) school students in Indonesia has triggered a national debate since the beginning 2003/2004 academic year. This debate seems to be never-ending as every party believes that they are in a right position.

Those who oppose it argue that this policy is considered to be ‘injustice’ to be used as a base to make a very important decision about students’ life future. This is due to the fact that there is still a big discrepancy in quality among schools across the regions in Indonesia. They also believe that the UN has brought about many conspicuous negative effects on teachers, students, parents, school administrators, and curriculum.

The government, on the other hand, says that the UN is important as the government needs it as a benchmark to evaluate the success of teaching and learning process in national level. The result of the UN will be used as one of important inputs as well as feedbacks for the government to formulate programs for the betterment and advancement of national education quality.

Having looked at this seemingly endless national debate, it is urgent and necessary to conduct a scientific study on what sort of impacts the UN have toward the teaching and learning process at school. The later findings are expected to be used by the related parties in finding out a way out of this issue by forming a relatively acceptable format of UN in Indonesia.

## **2. Some Important Features of Current National Examination**

As a national standardized test, the UN is addressed to all high school students all over the country

who sit in the third year (the new term used in the latest curriculum is “grade twelve” for senior high school or ‘grade nine’ for junior high school) of their schooling period.

According to clause 2 of the Decree No. 34/2007 from the Ministry of National Education or *Permendiknas*, the main goal of the UN is to measure and assess the students’ knowledge and competence in particular subjects they have learned. Clause 3 of the same decree specifically states that the UN is going to be used as one of consideration for four purposes: first, as a means of mapping Indonesia’s national education quality; second as a basis to determine whether students can pass and proceed from one educational level to another level; third, as the main consideration on whether to accept new students in the upper levels of education; fourth, as a basis to supervise and assist particular schools in order to achieve the quality of national education (Depdiknas, 2007).

One of important characteristics of UN (including UAN) is that the government employs the minimum threshold (popular with *passing grade*) for the candidates to achieve in order to pass the examination. The minimum threshold is increased year by year, from 3.01 in 2003 to 5.01 in 2006. Even, in 2007/2008 academic year, not only did the government raise the new minimum threshold, from 5.01 to 5.25, it also decided to include three more subjects to be tested in the UN as an addition to the existing ones – Bahasa Indonesia, English, and Economy. The new ones are Math, Sociology, and Geography for Social Science students, or Biology, Chemistry and Physics for Natural Science students (Depdiknas, 2007).

Again, the candidates must achieve the minimum threshold in order to pass the test. Otherwise, they are going to be considered ‘failed’. Consequently, they have to repeat all subjects in the following academic year (Depdiknas, 2007). In other words, failure to achieve the minimum threshold in UN will automatically result in failure to graduate from high school, regardless the student’s overall performance during their school years.

### **3. National Examination as a High-Stakes Testing**

McNamara (2000:48) defines a high-stakes test as “a test which provides information on the basis of which significant decisions are made about candidates”. So, in high stakes testing, a test is generally used as the basis to make an important decision about students’ lives. The decision could relate to admission to a course or to having access to the market place. It is a test “upon whose success or failure significant consequences depend” (Schrag, 2004: 255)

DeCesare (2002: 8) defines high-stakes testing in a slightly broader way; “it is a term that is used to describe programs designed to measure not only the achievement of students, but also of teachers, principals, and schools.” “High-stakes” is also used by DeCesare (2002:8) to describe assessment tools that can have a variety of consequences. In the case of schools, such consequences can range from “a letter of warning for low performance to mandatory reconstitution”.

Referring to the nature of the UN for senior high school students in Indonesia, without doubt, this test can also be classified as a high-stakes test, since it could affect students’ whole lives very seriously. This UN is really powerful in determining students’ future lives as it functions as a ‘gatekeeper’ who will allow or not allow the candidates to pursue their studies further. The result of the test will also determine whether candidates have access to the workplace, since most employers in Indonesia require job applicants to graduate with a minimum education of senior high school level. That is why, this national standardized test can be classified as what McNamara has called a “*high stakes test*” (2000:48)

### **4. Washback Effect**

*Washback effect* refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Cheng, 1997; Gates, 1995 in Brown, 2002; McNamara, 2000). According to Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, and Ferman (1996:298), washback is “the connections between testing and learning”; and for Messick (1996, cited in Brown, 2002: 9 ) washback is “the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or

inhibit language learning". Clearly then, the washback is roughly speaking the effect of testing on the teaching and learning processes.

According to Alderson and Wall (1993), the notion that testing influences teaching is referred to as 'backwash' in general education circles, but it has come to be known as 'washback' in British applied linguistics, specifically in the field of language education. Biggs (1995, cited in Cheng, 1997) uses the term 'backwash' to refer to the fact that testing drives not only the curriculum, but teaching methods and students' approaches to learning.

In a broader understanding, Bachman and Palmer (1996) have discussed washback as a subset of a test's impact on society, educational systems, and individuals. They state that test impact operates at two levels: the micro level (the effect of the test on individual students and teachers) and the macro level (the impact on society and its educational systems).

Slone and Kelly (2003:14) list some potential wash-back effects (both positive and negative) of high-stakes testing on students as shown in the table below:

**Table 1 - Potential Effects of High-Stakes Testing on Students**

<b>Positive Effects</b>	<b>Negative Effects</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Provide students with clearer information about their own knowledge and skills</li><li>- Motivate students to work harder in school</li><li>- Send clearer signals to students about what to study assessments</li><li>- Help students associate and align personal effort with rewards</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Frustrate students and discourage them from trying</li><li>- Make students more competitive</li><li>- Cause students to devalue to grades and school assessment</li></ul>

Another positive washback expected from a language testing point of view is that the test could motivate schools to achieve a high performance in a test, and at the same time the test can be used to identify the real quality of the teaching process in a particular school. Wright (2002:3) points out that "advocates of testing argue that attaching stakes to tests is necessary to hold schools accountable, reward high performing schools, and identify failing schools so they may be targeted for extra help".

However, a study to examine the effects of a high-stakes standardized test (the SAT-9), on a large inner-city elementary school in Southern California by Wright (2002) reveals contradictory findings when he found that the standardized testing had not resulted in higher quality teaching and learning in school; rather it has resulted in a narrowed curriculum and harmful effects on both teachers and students.

The teachers are stressed and overwhelmed by all the curricular changes and pressure to teach to the test and raise scores. They feel they are disempowered as professionals, and are no longer able to make decisions on how to best meet the needs of their students. They are tired of being compared to higher socioeconomic schools with significantly smaller numbers of ELL students and being blamed for their students' low scores .... (Wright, 2002: 28)

## **5. Research Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research approach, as this study is concerned with developing explanations of social phenomena. The researcher believes that issue of a high stakes test is a social phenomenon which can be investigated through a qualitative approach, since it aims to help us to understand the world in which we live and why things are the way they are.

More specifically, a phenomenological approach was employed for this study. The decision to use this approach was mainly because this research topic was related to a phenomenon in educational

settings. The issue of high-stakes testing is a clear phenomenon which we could explore through making sense of teachers' everyday experiences dealing with this issue. A phenomenological study is a qualitative study in which the researcher identifies the 'essence' of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants in a study (Creswell, 2003).

By employing a phenomenological study in this research, it was necessary for the researcher 'to bracket' his own assumptions about the topics explored and mainly rely on the analysis of transcribed semi-structured interviews to get the 'sense' of teachers' everyday experiences regarding the UN. As Creswell (2003: 8) states, "the goal of (qualitative) research, then, is to rely as much as possible on participant's views of the situation being studied." So, in the context of this research, every single aspect of the participant's experience was really meaningful for the researcher to generate the data.

This research was carried out with six experienced Indonesian English teachers aged 25 to 40 years old who are teaching in the third grade (or grade twelve according to the latest curriculum) of senior high schools in Tanah Datar District, West Sumatra Indonesia. The participants were chosen by *criterion purposeful* sampling (Patton, 1990). The criteria for the selection of teachers are that they should have current experience teaching to students of the third year of senior high school; they should be familiar with the current format of the UN; they should teach in a school located either in urban or rural areas; and they should be willing to participate in the research voluntarily.

Grade twelve teachers, rather than teachers from other grades, were selected for the study on the grounds that, because they have to help their students prepare for the UN to be taken at the end of school year, they would be more concerned with and have a better knowledge of the philosophy of the test than teachers teaching the other grades. Therefore, their input was considered potentially valid for this study. Considering the ethical issue, anonymity is used for all participants' names in this study.

Due to the fact that this study was conducted within a qualitative approach with a small number of participants, therefore the research findings can not be *generalized* (Yin, 2003, McMillan & Schumacher, 1993). In other words, the results of this study are limited and only valid for the specific participants. Nevertheless, the study may be still meaningful in analyzing other similar topics in this field, as the findings could be used as considerations in conducting further studies with different research participants.

## 6. Results

There are three dimensions of the test impacts explored during the interview; they are the impacts of the test on instructions and curriculum, the impact on teachers, and the impacts on students.

### 6.1. Impacts of the test on instructions and curriculum

The table bellows shows some identified impacts of the test on the teaching and learning process.

**Table 2. Impacts of the test on instructions and curriculum**

<b>Identified impacts on instructions and curriculum</b>	<b>Arya</b>	<b>Bunga</b>	<b>Aisia</b>	<b>Yasmin</b>	<b>Naf</b>	<b>Yusril</b>
Teaching to the test	√	√	√	√	√	√
Narrowing the curriculum	√			√	√	

#### 6.1.1. Teaching to the test

All participants confirmed that they conducted extra class after normal school hours to make sure that their students well prepared for the exam. In these extra classes, all participants reported that most of their teaching activities were performed in a way that is called as 'teaching to the test' activities prior to the examination. This means that all participants did teaching activities like familiarizing students

with the format of the test, discussing questions taken from the previous year test, teaching certain strategies to deal with certain kind of questions easily and quickly.

Bunga reported that as a part of this 'teaching to the test' process, she wrote many samples of the test items either for reading or listening skills. She also compiled sample of the test items from the previous year test.

We get a special program to prepare the students to do the test. We create many samples of test items by referring to the SKL [*passing competency standard*] given by the government. For example, for a narrative text in reading section, we compile some questions from the previous tests, including questions about skimming, scanning, detail information, and other micro skills in reading...then, we make some sample of questions about this text, and ask the students do these sample items.

In practice, Bunga further specifically emphasized that she tried to relate her teaching process to the format of the English National exam,

After seeing the content of the UN, I always provide listening section in my class, because this is very important. I try to make a good link between the real classroom teaching and the English test in the UN at the end of the lesson. I mean I try to relate the listening activities in my class with the items of questions in the English UN

Similar to Bunga, Aisya also reported that she were assigned to conduct an English extra class where she could review the lessons from the first year as well as discuss the sample questions from the previous year test,

The school principal assigns us to conduct an extra class for two periods in a week. What we do in the extra class is that most of the time we review and discuss the sample of the previous UN test. Then, I also bring some more questions to the class. Ask the students to answer the questions and discuss it again. Some times, I bring a tape recorder, and then we do listening practice

Another participant, Arya also reported a similar way. He said that he taught his students some strategies or tricks to answer the questions.

Most of the topic in the class discuss about the test. We provide the trick to the students about how to answer the questions in the test. So, we make the students accustomed to answer the questions in the test.

Yusril reported that he also did in the same ways as other participants. He discussed the questions with his students and introduced to his students some testing strategies,

... we always discuss the questions. We discuss the questions taken from the previous years of the test, starting from the questions at 2002 to the latest one, ... I try to explain to them about an easy method of how to answer the questions correctly. For example, we can introduce certain formula in teaching grammar. In teaching modality, for example, we can say to the students that the word after modality is always in *a verb word form*.

#### 6.1.2. Narrowing curriculum

Yasmin reported that due to the high stakes nature of the test, her school had a policy that two months prior to the examination day, the teachers were assigned to only focus on teaching the subjects tested in the final examination.

For two months, students only study the three subjects tested in the UN... so, they ignore the other subjects for the moment. No other subjects.

According to curriculum of Islamic senior high school, however, the students were supposed to learn sixteen subjects. So, they ignored the other thirteen subjects. The ignoring of the other subjects prior to the examination day was indeed leading to narrowing curriculum.

The same phenomenon reported by Arya,

Most of the schools now conduct an extra class. Usually they have eight subjects to study, but then before they have the final exam, they are required to follow three extra class; math, English, and Bahasa Indonesia. These three subjects will be tested in the final exam. We have extra class every day.

Even Naufal mentioned that in order to focus on these three subjects, his school had a policy to oblige students to stay in a dormitory around the school building and conducted extra class in the evening as well as in the afternoon.

Not only do students have extra class at noon, but also studying at night... The students have a class at night and stay in this place. After praying maghrib [night prayer], the teacher conducts a class for the three subjects tested in the UN; English, economic, and math

## 6.2. Test Impacts on Teachers

The following points were identified impacts of true nature of high stakes of the test on teachers. The impacts range from negative impacts (feeling under pressure and stressful) to positive impacts (being more motivated and more creative in teaching). The table below shows that there is a quite clear difference impacts on teachers perceived by the teachers who teach in urban areas from teachers who teach in rural areas.

**Table 3: Test Impacts on Teachers**

Identified impacts on teachers	Urban Area Teachers			Rural Area Teachers		
	Arya	Yasmin	Aisya	Bunga	Naf	Yusril
Feeling under pressure		√		√	√	√
Becoming better teachers	√	√		√	√	√

### 6.2.1. Feeling under pressure

In answering to the questions, “*due to the high stakes nature of the test, do you feel under pressure of this UN?*”, all participants teaching in rural areas and even one of the participants from urban areas confirmed that they felt under pressure to relate the teaching to the test. This pressure was triggered by various factors. Yusril reported that he felt under pressure because of a high demand either from the school principal or from the students’ parents to help students pass the test,

Yes, I do. Because I have to help students pass the test. You know what happen in 2005 was that only three of forty five students passed the UN. This condition really makes me under pressure. You know, the government, our school principal, students’ parents demand us to make all the students pass the test.

Yurnalis and Naufal confirmed that the *passing grade* policy made her feel under pressure as she was not sure that her students could achieve the specified minimum score to pass the test.

Yes, as a teacher, I really ...really... feel under pressure ... because the passing grade. I have to make the students pass the test with the point 5,25 average score. It is a high point for my students in this school. I think only 25 of 200 students can achieve the score easily (Yasmin)

Bunga added another reason why she felt under pressure. She concerned with the issue of how

society outside the school perceive the failure of students in the examination.

Yes, ... If the students fail in the final examination, the community will blame the teacher first, not the students. So, I think that this is a kind of a bad psychological aspect. Yes, I am sometimes feeling under pressure.

#### 6.2.2. Becoming better teachers

Apart from feeling under pressure, most participants reported the high stakes of the test had led them to be more effective English teachers. 'Better teachers' here means that the test had made them become more motivated, more creative, and more effective in using the time allocation prior to the examination day.

As Bunga realized that the testing system in which include the passing grade policy and the high stakes of the test had increased her motivation as a teacher,

if the government give a certain target, the school as a system has to manage school how to encourage the students in that school to go far from the target. This will increase teachers' motivation as well as students'.

Then, Naufal reported that having realized the high consequences of the test and seen the fact that his students are having low insufficient English ability, he was triggered to find out new teaching strategies to help his students pass the test.

I think that one of the positive effects for me is that the test policy has encouraged me to be a creative English teacher in terms of finding out new strategy in teaching English for my students. I know that my students are low in English, so that I have to find out the best strategy to help them pass the test

Naufal then gave example that he had to use students' mother tongue in delivering lessons in the class to enable students understand his lesson more easily.

... for example, I used to teach English by speaking English very fast, but now I try to speak English slowly with my students to make sure that what I am saying is understood by them. And even I sometime speak Bahasa Indonesia in explaining the certain material to my students.

### 6.3. Test Impacts on Students

According to the interviewed teachers, the test had also affected students in a relatively similar ways as being experienced by teachers. As table 3 shows that all participants from rural areas, including one participant from rural area confirmed that the high stakes of the test had led students to a situation where the students experienced psychological problems, like being worry, anxious, stressful and under pressure. Even, one participant also reported that the test had also indirectly triggered her students to do cheating in the test. However, all participants reported that the high stakes of the test had also motivated students to study harder in order to pass the test.

**Table 4. Test Impact on Students**

Identified impacts on students	Urban Area Teachers			Rural Area Teachers		
	Arya	Yasmin	Aisya	Bunga	Naufal	Yusril
Feeling under pressure		√		√	√	√
Willing to engage in cheating		√				
Being more motivated	√	√	√	√	√	√

#### 6.3.1. Feeling under pressure

Most of teachers reported that their students experienced psychological problems in facing the test. Yasmin said that a high quantity of the lessons to be reviewed is one of the reasons that make students feel under pressure.

I think that this policy is a burden for them as there are so many materials that they have to finish. Many materials ... from the first grade, the second, and the third grade, that they have to study right now. The time to have a test is so close. There are so many materials to be caught up. (Yasmin).

Specifically, Yusril and Bunga described some psychological problems encountered by his students prior to the test, some students worry, nervous, and feel afraid doing the test. They are really afraid of not passing the test

#### 6.3.2. Willing to engage in cheating

One participant, Yasmin, honestly reported that their students did cheating during the examination in order to pass the test,

May be *only ten percent of them can do the test by themselves* ... I mean for those who didn't have motivation, they might be cheating on the test to pass the test ... you know there is a passing grade they need to pass. But they don't have ability to pass it. Then, they ask their friends to help them in order to pass the test.

#### 6.3.3. Being more motivated teachers

Apart from the negative impacts of the test on students, some participants reported the positive sides of test. Yasmin reported that she could use the test policy to encourage her students to study harder and be more motivated in order to pass the test,

I use this policy just to motivate them to study harder. I can make them to have more motivation by reminding them about this new policy, that they have to pass this passing grade standard. It can make them realize that they have to study hard to get that point

Similar to Yasmin, Bunga also confirmed that her students were also more motivated to study harder because of this high stake test,

If the government give a certain target, ... this will increase teachers' motivation as well as students'.

### 7. Discussion

The data analysis shows us some identified negative and positive affects of the UN as perceived by the teachers. The effects are as follows:

#### 7.1. Teaching to the Test

From the data collected, it is apparent that the high stakes of UN has led teachers to teach to the test. This activity implies doing something in class that may not be compatible with teacher's own values and goals or with the values or goals stated in the curriculum. Most of teaching activities focus on familiarizing the students with the features of the test as well as introducing test taking strategies to the students to enable them to answer the questions well. The teaching to the test phenomenon has also made teachers neglect other subjects which are not tested in this UN. As Popham (2000, cited in Volante, 2004, p. 3) maintains, "teaching to the test phenomenon may include relentless drilling on test content, eliminating important curricular content not covered by the test, and providing interminably long practice session that incorporates actual items from these high-stakes standardized tests".

In the Indonesian classroom context, all participants in this study reported that they used normal



class hours as well as extra classes for activities like familiarizing the students with the test format, discussing the questions, discussing strategies to answer the questions more easily and more quickly as well as conducting some trial tests prior to the real examination. As Bunga, Yusril, and Arya clearly reported, they made a close link between the contents of their teaching with the content of the UN test.

These findings are consistent with other studies conducted by Cheng (1997). Her study reveals that the introduction of Hong Kong Certificate English Education (HKKCE) has brought about a change in teaching content. She also reports that 84% of teachers among her research participants admit that they change their teaching methodology in order to familiarize students with the test.

Some teachers might view teaching to the test as something unavoidable as they have to familiarize their students with the nature and the format of the test. Some of them might even believe that knowledgeable students could miss an item (or a set of items) if they do not understand the mechanics of taking a particular test (Mehrens, 1989, cited in Volante, 2004). Therefore, these teachers argue that item teaching is necessary to familiarize all students prior to the test.

Yet it is worthwhile bearing in mind that the practice of teaching to the test could bring about some problems. It could result in some unwanted consequences within the nature of teaching and learning. Popham (2001, cited in Volante 2004) has argued that “item-teaching, instruction around items either found on a test or a set of look-alike items, is reprehensible since it erodes the inferences we can make about students’ scores.”

By this understanding, we can not simply judge a student’s English proficiency, for example, merely based on his or her English score in the UN. A student who gets a high score after being exposed extensively to items of the English UN through items teaching activities might have poor real English proficiency. On the other hand, it is possible for a certain student who has relatively good English competence get a lower score, because the teacher does not employ items teaching, and therefore the student is not familiar with the test mechanism.

This research finding implies that a high score obtained by students in a particular school might not accurately reflect that school has a good teaching quality. It is possible that they get a good score, because they do ‘teaching to the test’ activities intensively prior to the test. Conversely, it is likely for the students who enroll in a school with a good English program to get a lower score, because English teachers in this school focus on the nature of teaching as mandated in the English curriculum, instead of focusing on teaching to the test. Schools with excellent students English debate activities, for example, might be unable to achieve an excellent score in English test, as the test does not assess students’ speaking or debate skills. So, because of the teaching of the test, “schools may be mistakenly categorized as high achieving because of their utilization of inappropriate test preparation activities, not necessarily because of the actual characteristics of their student body” (Volante, 2004:12)

Furthermore, the practice of teaching to the test in Indonesian classrooms has also undermined the predictive validity of the test results, as the results are likely not to give an authentic picture of the candidates’ proficiency, and therefore could not be used as the basis to predict their academic achievement in the higher levels of education. Thus, “the predictive validity of a standardized test is compromised when teaching to the test techniques are employed” (Burger & Krueger, 2003 cited in Volante, 2004: 11).

## **7.2. Narrowing the Curriculum**

Another subsequent impact of teaching to the test activities as perceived by teachers is that the test, in some ways, has narrowed down the school curriculum (Yeh cited in Mitchel, 2006). This means that the teachers mainly focus on teaching the subjects tested in the national exam and ignore other subjects. Volante (2004:9) maintains, “Teaching to the test not only reduces the depth of instruction in specific subjects but it also narrows the curriculum so that non-tested disciplines receive less attention during the school day”.

In current Indonesian classroom practices, time is often devoted away from subjects like history,

religious teaching, physical education, arts, and Information Technology. In other words, teachers provide more instructional time on commonly tested areas like Bahasa Indonesia, English and Mathematics. Yasmin, one of the participants reported on this phenomenon in her school. "... for two months, students only study the subjects tested in the UN... so, they ignore the other subjects for the moment. No other subjects ..."

It is not a surprise then that the teachers tend to focus only to these tested subjects and they forgot and ignored the other subjects. The ignoring of these subjects in the schools could undoubtedly lead teachers to narrow down the curriculum. There will be unmentioned understanding in the students' and teachers' minds that the other subjects are not as important as other tested-subjects.

A serious problem may appear if teachers as well as students think in such a way, since they may find in their real life later that the ignored subjects are, in fact, very important. In English teaching context, a student may develop a narrow view of English learning. They might have been misled by the fact that the English test in the UN only addresses two macro skills (reading and listening), and therefore many teachers focus on teaching these two skills. It is possible that this focus would lead students to an unmentioned understanding that other skills (speaking and writing) are not as important as reading and listening skills. In fact, these four skills are equally important when they communicate later in a real life situation.

Herman (2002, cited in Volante, 2004) further argues that teaching a narrow curriculum is likely to isolate some students whose academic strengths lie outside of the tested skills. In an English testing context, students who are good at speaking and writing would probably unable to pass the test, as the test does not assess their speaking and writing skills.

### **7.3. Willing to Engage in Cheating**

The high stakes nature of the test has encouraged some students in Indonesia to be willing to engage in cheating during the examination. The cheating itself is not only triggered by the high stakes of the test, unfairness issues within the passing grade policy have also contributed to the cheating phenomenon during the UN in Indonesia. As Yasmin confessed, her students were identified as engaging in cheating, because they had to achieve the required minimum score in order to pass the test, otherwise they would need to repeat it in the following year.

Cheating cases in the UN do not only happen in Yasmin's school, but have also been identified in other schools across the regions in Indonesia. Some cases appeared to the public when the UN was conducted in 2006/2007 academic year. It was reported, for example, that 72 of Dhuafa Vocational High School students in Padang West Sumatera walked out from the test rooms as a protest to the exam committee. They could have perceived the committees as doing nothing when other students were allegedly cheating in the examination (Bachyul, 2007).

Another case was in Medan city, North Sumatera. Some teachers in this city quitted from being the test invigilators and then gathered to report the allegedly systematic cheating all over the Medan region. This group of teachers attracted nationwide attention when they presented evidence of rampant cheating during the examination. They reported that the cheating itself had been systematically organised by some principals and teachers long before the test day (Gunawan, 2007).

It is believed that these cheating cases are closely related to the issues of unfairness within the *passing grade* policy. As the required minimum score is considered too high for their students to achieve, some school principals might try to find out a 'shortcut' to pass the test. They do not want to see their students fail in the test, because if many students fail, as school principals, they are going to be the first persons to be blamed by parents and society. Therefore they try any way possible to help their students pass the test, including by stealing the question papers prior to the examination day as happened to a high school principal who was caught stealing the papers in Ngawi, East Java (Gunawan, 2007).

Cheating cases during the employment of a high-stakes test seem to be not only specific to

Indonesia. A study by Jacob and Levitt (2003) reported similar issues that the pressures of high-stakes school testing may encourage teachers and administrators to doctor test results. Jacob and Levitt examined records from approximately 1,000 Chicago public school classrooms in grades 3-7 from the years 1993-2000. They found that on any given exam, school personnel appeared to cheat in 4 to 5 percent of classrooms. The methods of cheating could include behaviors such as changing students' answers, providing students with answers before or during the test.

The methods of teachers' involvement in alleged cheating during the UN in Indonesia are similar to Jacob and Levitt's study. The alleged cheating cases in Indonesia indicate that teachers distributed question sheets to students prior to the examination, changed their students' answers and provided answers for the students before and during the examination either through cellular phone messages or through a piece of paper placed somewhere where certain students could easily pick it out and then distribute it to other students (Napitupulu, 2007).

Whatever the reasons, cheating is indeed a crime. This misbehaviour is really an unhappy story for the future of Indonesian education. It will certainly affect the way the students learn. It is likely that they are unwilling to study hard anymore, as they can pass the test easily by engaging in cheating during examination. Furthermore, cheating can erode and kill the basic educational values which engender respect for discipline, hard working ethics, and honesty.

#### **7.4. Feeling stressed and under pressure**

The high stakes nature of the test has made teachers feel stressed and under pressure in conducting teaching activities prior to the test day. This stress is also triggered by the fact that teachers have high expectations from school principals and from parents in order to help students pass the test. Consequently, many participants in this study, like Bunga, Yusril and Yasmin, reported that they were feeling insecure and worried if their students would not pass the test. They are afraid of being blamed by the society as being unqualified teachers if many students failed in the examination.

If the students fail in the final examination, the community will blame the teacher first, not the students. So, I think that this is a kind of a bad psychological aspect. Yes, I am sometimes feeling under pressure (Bunga)

This finding is consistent with those from other studies about the impact of high-stakes testing on the teachers, such as a study to examine the effects of a high-stakes standardized test (the SAT-9), on a large inner-city elementary school in Southern California by Wright (2002:28). Apart from narrowing the curriculum, the study reveals that the standardized testing resulted in harmful effects on both teachers and students. One of the effects on teachers is that "teachers are stressed and overwhelmed by all the curricular changes and pressure to teach to the test and raise scores".

It is obviously not good for the teaching process if teachers are feeling under pressure. This insecure feeling may lead teachers to a situation where they can not enjoy their profession. When teachers find that teaching is no longer enjoyable, it may prevent their efforts to be creative and professional. The worst thing is that this unwanted situation will eventually affect the educational quality in Indonesia. If this situation happens, where teachers are feeling unhappy due to pressure of the UN, it is certainly a paradoxical situation as the existence of the UN itself was initially intended to improve the quality of national education in Indonesia.

#### **7.5. Positive Impact of the UN**

Apart from its negative impact, this study has also revealed that the test has brought some positive effects to the teaching and learning process. The most salient one is that it has made most teachers as well as students invest more substantial efforts into the process of teaching and learning. Teachers, like Yusril, Bunga, Naufal reported that the test has made them become more motivated to teach better,

more creative in finding out enhanced teaching strategies, and more efficient in managing the teaching time allocation. At the same time, teachers reported that most of their students are also motivated to study harder and to use their time to study wisely.

Regardless of the fact that their main reason to teach and study harder is to find how they could pass the test, this positive impact is believed, in some ways, to improve the educational quality and academic achievement of the students. Mitchel (2006) points out, “ ... that testing had some positive effects on student attitudes and achievement, such as encouragement to achieve and pursue a consistent course of study”.

The fact that this test has improved teachers,’ as well as students’, motivation to teach and study harder is used by the government to maintain the UN policy. Apart from using the UN as a means of controlling national education quality, the government also argues that this is one of the effective ways to make sure that teachers do their best, and students put substantial efforts into teaching and learning (Kompas, 2005).

## **8. Conclusion**

This study reveals that the high stakes of the UN has affected instructions negatively. The effects are that the test leads teachers to teach to the test, narrows down curriculum, makes teachers stressed and under pressure, encourages students to engage in cheating, and encourages teachers to have so called ‘score oriented teaching’. However, the study has also found that the test has encouraged teachers as well as students to teach and study harder in order to pass the test.

## **REFERENCES**