
Managing Quantity or Quality? Students' Voices for English Subject in the National Standardized Exam

FRIDIYANTO,¹ MARZUL HIDAYAT,*² MIFTAHUL KHAIRANI,³ AND
IMELDA YOSE,*⁴

Abstract

The issue of quality is always a significant one and it will continue to be one of the predominant points of debate in education. Through a qualitative method, this study aimed to explore the experiences and the meaning that students faced in the national standardized exam for English subject. The data were collected by demographic background questionnaire and in-depth interviews with fifteen participants. The demographic data were analyzed descriptively, while the interviews were analyzed by within-case and cross-case analyses. The results of the data analysis revealed that four interrelated issues including cheating and dishonesty as bad consequences in the national standardized exam, it is like a yearly educational festival and formality, sharpening the student's memories through extra classes and materials, and unfair grade and the spreading of illegal answer keys were important experiences and challenged our participants' academic and social careers as the next generation of the country. Recommendations for future research and for taking some actions regarding the effects of the national standardized exam are offered.

Keywords

Cheating and dishonesty, English subject, standardized national exam, unfair grade

1 Senior Lecturer at Universitas Islam Negeri Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin, Jambi, Indonesia; email: fridiyanto@uinjambi.ac.id

2 *Corresponding author¹, Senior Lecturer at Universitas Jambi, Indonesia; email: mhiday@unja.ac.id

3 Lecturer at Universitas Islam Negeri Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin, Jambi, Indonesia.

4 *Corresponding author², Universitas Dinamika Bangsa, Jambi, Indonesia; email: imeldayose.stikom@gmail.com

Introduction

Indonesian government uses the national standardized exam to improve the quality of education. The national standardized exam policy in Indonesia has been an extensive debate among the proponents and opponents of the exam. Many think that the exam is one method of education standardization which is in the lack of considering unplanned consequences for every subject teacher and for students.

The proponents and opponents of the standardized exam policy have become the focus of previous literature. For example, Herman and Golan (1991) claim that the supporters of standardized exam argue that the exam does an ideal work of providing the sign required to make norm-referenced explanations of students' knowledge and/or skill to increase the quality of national education. Another argument comes from Linn (2000) who says that a standardized exam is relatively low-cost, but does not measure students' ability flawlessly; it will always hold some forms of errors although its implementation and reporting of results usually can be done quickly and easily. One study from Indonesia done by Mukminin et al. (2013, p. 20) who found, "It seems that testing sponsors and policymakers at national, provincial, and district levels still consider testing as an important, positive, and cost effective device in educational improvement."

However, the study found that the exam resulted in some unintended consequences for teachers, schools, students and parents. The study, furthermore, found that teaching and learning processes were focused on the test while students focused on how they were able to answer the questions in the exam correctly. Nevertheless, research on the students' experiences on the national standardized exam in the specific subject has not much been studied yet. The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning and experiences of students when they faced the national standardized exam for English subject. The essence of lived experiences is defined as, "mutually understood core meanings that define a unique set of experiences" (Patton, 2002, p.106). To achieve the purpose of this study, the following question was used to guide the study: What are students' experiences on the national standardized exam related to English subject?

Methodology

Research design, participants, and locale of the study

The study was designed as a qualitative one with a phenomenological approach. This approach is appropriate for understanding the essence of students' experiences when they were taking English subject in the national standardized exam. Mukminin (2012) suggests that phenomenological approach as one of the five qualitative traditions is used to understand how one or more persons experiences a phenomenon. In this study, we attempted to understand how one or more students experienced on the national standardized exam related to English subject. In the first phase, we used demographic profile backgrounds to gather basic demographic data about our participants who were studying at

one English study program, in a public university in Jambi, Indonesia. The criteria of recruitments for the participants were that they were English study program students and they were fresh or new students or in the first year in their program. According to Mukminin (2012), the essential matter in the phenomenological approach is to describe the meaning of the lived experiences from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon under the study by gathering evidence involving in-depth interviews with 5 to 25 individuals. Fifteen new students of one English study program were involved and willing to participate in this study.

The site of this study was one English study program, in a public university in Jambi, Indonesia. The reason why we chose the site was because we had access to it. Due to the study site policy, we, then, asked permission from the study site. After we obtained permission from the authorities, we sent participants an informed consent form and a background survey. For protecting our participants, we followed what Mukminin (2012) suggests that to protect the participants, the researcher must mask the name of people and research site through the use of pseudonyms for the participants and sites.

Data collection

In order to understand how one or more students experienced on the national standardized exam related to English subject and to explore the experiences and the meaning that students faced in the national standardized exam for English subject, we collected data through demographic profiles and in-depth interviews with fifteen participants. All of the names were masked for their confidentiality. Our first participant was Triana who is a female student and she was in the second semester of the program. Next, Judika is a male student who was in the second semester. Our third participant was Helena who is a female student and who told us that she graduated with a satisfied grade in the English subject than any subjects in the middle school. We had Deny who is a male student in the program. Next, Dea is our female student who got a good GPA. Then, we had Linda who is a female student. Another participant was Kurnia, a female student who graduated from an outstanding school in the Jambi province. Next, Romiah who is a female student and received “the best achievement” in the debate competition when she was a senior high school student. Sadam is also our male participant. He came to the university with a full scholarship from the Jambi Government. Then, Syahru, a male student, is our participant whose English is not very fluent and used Indonesian during the interview. We were happy to have Reka, a female student, as our participant and she got “the best dancer” in the Pop Mie Competition. Then, we had Mili, a female student, as our participant. Our next participant was Tiwi, a female student in the program. Another important participant was Sherina, a female student who had a great GPA during her first semester in the program. Our last participant was Putri, a female student who graduated from a private senior high school before coming to the program.

We used in-depth interviews with fifteen participants as described above. In this study, we used in-depth interviews as the only way to collect data. We had no opportunities

for observing or collecting data from documents. However, we were allowed to record the interviews by our participants. An interview with research participants is one of the powerful data collection methods in qualitative tradition (Mukminin, 2019; Mukminin, Ali, & Ashari, 2015). We conducted face-to-face interviews with fifteen participants in different places and time. Each participant was interviewed more than 3 times and each interview for participants lasted between 45 and 65 minutes. We could not ask participants more time as we did not want to make our participants feel forced. At the beginning of the interview, each participant was requested to provide a brief introduction about herself or himself. We told our participants that all their information would be kept confidential. We constructed several general and specific questions regarding participants' experiences on the national standardized exam related to English subject. We posed questions such as what kinds of experiences did they encounter in their final year in senior high school related to learning the English subject and the national standardized exam? In addition, we asked to describe how they felt about the teaching process while taking the national exam; what they thought about the national standardized exam; did they agree that the national exam can be standard for the quality of the students in Indonesia?

Data analysis and trustworthiness

We started analyzing the individual interview data through transcribing the interview data. Each researcher read all the results of transcriptions. We, then, conducted meetings to discuss the interview data in order to have the same perceptions on the data. After reading transcriptions, all of us started doing *coding* to identify themes and patterns of the interview data. During the coding processes, we had a lot of discussion regarding the themes and sub-themes as we had various kinds of data. However, we got back to our research goals, namely exploring the meaning and experiences students when they faced the national standardized exam for English subject. To find and describe the experiences, we analyzed and reanalyzed the individual interview data through distributing the individual and group interview data so that were able to record every noteworthy account which was relevant to our study. Then, we looked at the individual patterns and themes in order to create collections of meanings by organizing all significant statements among our participants into fixed themes or meaning units. Finally we deleted repetitive data among our participants.

To deal with the trustworthiness of this study, we realized the following procedures. First, our study took on prolonged engagement and repeated interviews with our participants. We had individual interviews lasting between 45 and 65 minutes. Second, we triangulated data through multiple interviews. Then, we had member checks through asking participant feedback on the accuracy and credibility of the data and findings. Finally for the dependability of the findings, we provided rich and thick description (Mukminin, 2012; Mukminin, 2019; Mukminin & McMahan, 2013).

Ethical considerations

We gave all our participants the informed consent forms and all their names and answers in the interviewees were treated with confidentiality.

Findings

This study intended to explore the meaning and experiences of students when they faced the national standardized exam for English subject. The fifteen participants' experiences and accounts are presented in the following major themes.

Cheating and dishonesty as bad consequences in the national standardized exam

The findings of our study indicated that participants in this study experienced bad consequences of the national standardized exam. For them, the meaning of the exam was beyond their expectation. Instead of measuring their language competence in English, the exam made them experience something out of their mind. They were challenged by the fact that cheating and dishonesty were part of the exam. For example, students reflected,

“During the National Examination, I think the first time I think I would be hard to finish my exam for chemistry, physics, math, biology, but you know there is a cheat and it makes me easy to finish my work sheet....If we want answer keys, teachers and school just let our activity go, there was no prohibition from them.”[Judika]

Our interviewees also indicated that supervision was not done properly during the exam. It led students to cheat each other in the classroom. For example, one student reported,

“Security is less tight in the classroom. So we can cheat each other.” [Sadam]

In general, our participants voiced the indirect involvement of schools and teachers in cheating during the exam. One of the explanations why schools and teachers were involved was due to the success of all students. As Deny and Tiwi reported,

“The school is part of students' success...many of them used some tricks such as cheating with friends.”[Deny]

“Honestly I didn't really have problems when I faced the national examination....many tricks that we do, cheating is a choice.”[Tiwi]

The data above indicate that the national exam seems to bring bad consequences for students, teachers, and schools. Students did not worry about the exam as they found “the answer keys” for the English subject even though they were not sure if “those keys” are right or wrong. They seemed to be confident to have “the keys.” The question is: Are they really

able to communicate in English? By looking at the data above, the exam has not thought the unintended consequences for students' behavior.

It is like a yearly educational festival and formality

Our findings revealed that the national standardized exam for English subject seemed not be able to measure students' ability in the language. Our participants reported that they felt that what they experienced in the exam was not like what they expected. For our participants, the exam was like a yearly activity that Indonesian students had to face. Particularly, participants reported that the exam was like an annual event and festival. For example,

"I think the exam is not an horror, because teachers allow us even in-direct ways to do "something"... it is like an annual event." [Judika]

"It is the same like a semester exam. I do not have to worry and scare about it." [Romiah]

"This exam is like a festival to make everybody happy." [Tiwi]

"It is like a semester exam; yeah, I mean there is nothing really special. When I faced it, there is nothing to worry about it as I'll pass on it." [Helena]

Our participants' feeling about the exam indicated that it was like an exam that they had every semester. They believed that they would be successful in the exam. Our participants reported that the meaning of the exam for them was like a symbol from the government to get a diploma or certificate so that they could continue their study to higher level one. It was not really related to look at their language competence.

"The exam is just as a symbol to pass students from current level, so it is not so important, as you know time by time, year by year, they always cheat." [Linda]

"For students who follow the exam, they will pass, if not they wouldn't pass. I think it is just like a symbol, the purpose to make students pass and out from school wisely." [Syahru]

What our participants experienced and reported in this study might open the educational policymakers regarding the function of the exam, particularly, the English subject. Participants perceived that the exam was supposed to be designed to evaluate students' ability to communicate in English as an international language. However, in the exam, our participants felt that it was kind of a formality for graduation. They reported,

"It is not really a test for our English ability, it is a bridge for us to graduate or if we wants to continue to university." [Triana]

"In my mind, the exam is like a requirement from educational stakeholders to fulfill what the system wants." [Reka]

"The government gives us the way to continue our study by passing the national exam." [Linda]

The national standardized exam for English subject had not helped our participants to evaluate their English ability. Our participants felt that they would pass the exam whatever the situation was and whatever their ability was. For them, the exam was just one of the ways to show that they government had implemented their policy. Looking at the data from the interviews, our participants experienced the unimportance of the exam. They felt that there should be something to be done to help them succeed in studying, particularly, the English subject.

Sharpening the student's memories through extra classes and materials

Another thought-provoking matter emerged from the interview processes related to the English subject in the national exam was what participants said about their memory practices. The data from the interview indicated that before they took the exam, they were trained to be skillful at taking the test for English subject. Participants shared their ideas related to the theme; they reported that teachers and school “sharpened” their thoughts and skill for the test through extra classes which were provided by the school and the teachers. For instance,

“Probably, by learning over and over it can help students to sharp their brain to remember those subjects.”[Judika]

The memory practices done by school and teachers were also voiced by other participant including Kurnia who reported that after school, students were not going home; instead, they had extra classes related to the national exam.

“It helps us to remember the subject that probably we forgot. With extra classes that we have in the afternoon, teachers send materials to us about what to study.”[Kurnia]

In order to help students succeed in the exam, schools and teachers tried to provide their students with more strategies for answering the questions for English subject in the exam. In the words of Reka,

“We are drilled to have strategies for answering the tests correctly.”[Reka]

Within this theme, participants clearly stated that they were helped by the teachers giving them test materials for every subject such as the English subject. Our participants experienced intense drilling to face the exam. They were prepared by their schools and teachers to be able to answer the questions in the exam. It is interesting that their schools and teachers seemed to be ordered to prepare them for succeeding in the test if not; their schools might be thought as a failed school. This theme is like contradictory with the themes of “cheating and dishonesty as bad consequences in the national standardized exam and it is like a yearly educational festival and formality.” On one side, during the exam, our participants experienced “cheating and dishonesty and formality.” On the other side, schools and teachers drilled their students with extra classes. These kinds of extra classes provoked

schools and teachers to focus on preparing students to learn subjects for the national exam in their final year. For instance,

“We are trained to focus on the tested subjects in our final year.”[Linda]
Participants also mentioned that their schools and teachers always drilled them so that they could get used to having a real situation of the exam. As Romiah described,

“We are drilled to face the subjects to be tested in the national exam.”[Romiah]
Another participant who also felt that his school and teachers paid more attention to their final exam and even he explained his school made a mock test for all students in the final year.

“We have what we call “a try-out exam.” It is like a real exam for English subject. Then, the result will be announced and if we get a lower score, there will be more classes before the real exam.”[Deny]
Within this theme, we also found that teachers and schools were motivated to spend more money on copying test materials. These kinds of tests were thought to be similar to ‘the real tests’ for English subject. Participants reported,

“We have worksheets and guide books and teachers give material from previous years’ tests to be discussed.”[Linda]
Like Linda, Helena also admitted that her school and teachers helped her with extra classes and materials from previous tests.

“The school provides us with the previous tests to learn in our extra classes.”[Helena]
The data in our findings revealed that the national standardized exam had driven all stakeholders in education to make all students successful. Schools and teachers, particularly, were busy with preparing their students by giving their students “drills” before the real exam.

Unfair grade and the spreading of illegal answer keys

In our study, participants largely agreed that the effect of the national examination was to encourage students to look for other ways to help them pass without feeling fear that they might get a lower grade or score. Participants in this study admitted that they tried to find answer keys for the exam without the assistance from their school and the teachers as they realized that their ability in English was not that good. For example,

“For some students who got answer keys, they could get a higher grade than who did not get answer keys.”[Linda]

Linda explained that she and her friends tried to find the answer keys for the English subject. They did it in order to have a higher score if not; they would get a lower score. Another participant articulated that if they got a lower score, the impact was not only for the students, but also for the schools and teachers. They all mentioned that the result of the national exam was a kind of school prestige among the regions. As Syahrul explained,

“The school prestige will appear in the national exam by student effort to get a good score.... the grade is not my expectation, cheating everywhere. But I can do that.”[Syahrul]

One of the important issues that we found in our study was unfair grades. Participants frequently described the importance of “fairness” in the exam. They complained that the students who got a higher score due to the answer keys were unfair. However, it was like a common issue. Participants reported that schools and teachers should stop such as a kind of “illegal activities.” For example, this sentiment was articulated by Mili who said,

“They search answer keys everywhere together with their whole friends.”[Mili]

Other participants also commented on the issue of “fairness. They thought that the answer keys were the worse way to succeed in the exam. In the words of a female participant,

“What my friends mostly thought is to have answer keys for the English subject without thinking about their ability.” [Triana]

The findings of our study revealed that the impacts of the exam on students’ cognitive, affective, and psychomotor areas seem to challenge our academic integrity. Looking at the findings of this study, the impacts of the exam on students’ behaviors are highly miserable. Participants in this study felt uncomfortable before, while, and after the exam. The result of their exam might not measure their real ability in English.

Discussion

It was challenging to conclude what experiences that students faced in the national standardized exam for English subject as their experiences seemed to be complicatedly intertwined. Although the importance of the national standardized exam policy in every country is different, limited previous studies have focused specially on the experiences of students when they faced the national standardized exam for English subject (Mukminin et al., 2013; Mukminin et al., 2017). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the meaning and experiences of students when they faced the national standardized exam for English subject. The essence of lived experiences is defined as, “mutually understood core meanings that define a unique set of experiences” (Patton, 2002, p.106). Previous studies (Mukminin et al., 2013; Mukminin et al., 2017) have documented that both students and teachers face unique experiences and concerns related to the national standardized exam for English subject. Based on our data, we found that several concerns marked our participants’ experiences, including cheating and dishonesty as bad consequences

in the national standardized exam, it is like a yearly educational festival and formality, sharpening the student's memories through extra classes and materials, and unfair grade and the spreading of illegal answer keys.

Our participants reported their experiences that they faced in the national standardized exam for English subject. All of the participants reported cheating and dishonesty as bad consequences in the national standardized exam and unfair grade and the spreading of illegal answer keys existed before, during, and after the exam. Mukminin et al. (2013) and Mukminin et al. (2017), in their studies, also found that cheating was one of the effects of the exam for both students and teachers. In our study, students seemed to have chances for doing cheating by looking for answer keys as their teachers and schools did not pay too much attention. Stecher (2002) revealed that there were several positive and negative effects of standardized tests both for school, teachers, and students such as curriculum, morale, and motivation. However, this concern does not fit what Herman and Golan (1991) claim that the standardized exam is an ideal work of providing the indication necessary to make norm-referenced justifications of students' knowledge and/or skill to enhance the quality of national education.

The students in our study revealed that the national standardized exam was like a yearly educational festival and formality. They confirmed that the exam was like a mandatory activity for implementing an education policy without considering students' backgrounds. They also told us that the exam did not really measure their ability in English subject which is in line with what Linn (2000) says that a standardized exam is relatively low-cost, but does not measure students' ability flawlessly. Additionally, Amrein, and Berliner (2002) claimed that high-stakes testing policies did not consistently improve the general learning and competencies of students.

Our participants testified that sharpening the student's memories through extra classes and materials was the concerns as the effects of the exam. They revealed that their schools and teachers just focused on the subjects for the exam by providing extra materials and classes. Mukminin et al. (2013) and Mukminin et al. (2017) found that teachers and schools are likely to teach subjects for the exam so that students, teachers, and schools would be considered a top school. In their study, Mukminin et al. (2017) found that teachers and schools prepared their students for having strategies for succeeding in the exam. Similarly, Firestone, Mayrowetz, and Fairman (1998) illuminated that high-stakes testing had imposed teachers to parallel their curriculum to the subject tested. Our participants reported that extra classes and materials were the things that they had in their final year in the school. The experience of our participants was related to what Hoffman, Assaf, and Paris (2001) found that teachers spent more hours (between 8 and 10 hours) a week for their students' test preparation during the entire year.

It is also important to note that, however, our findings should be considered in light of several limitations. In terms of our sample size, it was not a big one as it was a qualitative study, so, generalizability of our findings to other students outside our sample is cautioned. Also, our findings might be limited because we analyzed the data by looking at the experiences of students, not teachers and schools or government officials. Our findings are

limited to the extent that they are grounded on our interpretations from fifteen participants' data, though, we tried to reduce our biases in analyzing the data, and it is probable that our insights and perspectives affected the aspects of the study.

Conclusion and Implications

Overall, the findings of this study revealed that four interrelated issues including cheating and dishonesty as bad consequences in the national standardized exam, it is like a yearly educational festival and formality, sharpening the student's memories through extra classes and materials, and unfair grade and the spreading of illegal answer keys were important experiences and challenged our participants' academic and social career as the next generation of the country. Although our conclusions are limited by our small sample scope, this study contributes to an understanding of what experiences that students faced in the national standardized exam for English subject. To this end, it is essential that other researchers replicate our study. From this replication, additional experiences might emerge, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of experiences that students faced in the national standardized exam for English subject. For policymakers, our findings may be inputs for reforming the exam to be a local-made test involving schools and teachers in assessing their student learning as they know exactly what happens to their students.

Disclosure statement

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Biographical notes

Dr. FRIDIYANTO works as a senior lecturer at Universitas Islam Negeri Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin, Jambi, Indonesia; email: fridiyanto@uinjambi.ac.id

MARZUL HIDAYAT, PhD. works as a senior lecturer at Universitas Jambi, Indonesia; email: mhiday@unja.ac.id

MIFTAHUL KHAIRANI, M.Pd. works as a lecturer at Universitas Islam Negeri Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin, Jambi, Indonesia.

IMELDA YOSE, M.Pd. works as a senior lecturer at Universitas Dinamika Bangsa, Jambi, Indonesia; email: imeldayose.stikom@gmail.com