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Washback Effect of Standardized High-Stakes Tests on Academic Achievement in English Lesson: A Study on High School Entrance Exam in Türkiye

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Washback, defined as the effect of exams on teaching and learning processes, has been analyzed under two main categories: positive and negative washback. Exams with significant outcomes can influence participants, educational policies, classroom practices, schools, educational systems, and society as a whole. Thus, this paper examines the washback effect of high-stakes tests on the high school students' academic achievement in English lesson. Relational survey research design was used. The sample consisted of 806 high school students, including 416 females, and 390 males. The research aimed to identify differences in participants' achievement levels based on their June 2020 LGS (High School Entrance Exam) exam scores in the English section and compare with scores that the same participants obtained four years later from the same test questions. It was found that students' average scores in the English section of the June 2020 LGS were 48.01 out of 100, but dropped to 39.31 when they were retested four years later. Statistically significant differences favoring the initial LGS exam were observed in both comparisons based on school-type and overall student performance in LGS and LGS-Retest scores. Based on the research findings, it has been determined that the YKS (Higher Education Institutions Examination) exam system and its content exert a strong negative washback effect on students' academic achievement in English.

Introduction

Foreign language education is undeniably important for individuals to develop global communication skills and compete internationally. However, considering the national and international exam results, the effectiveness of foreign language education in Türkiye still needs to improve. Although students take approximately 1000 hours of English lessons over 12 years of their education, the lessons focus more on the rules of the language, and the communicative

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aspect of the language is not emphasized enough (Çelebi & Kalay, 2023). The lack of assessment methods that measure speaking skills in Türkiye makes it difficult for students to communicate effectively, even at the beginner level (Paker, 2012). Foreign language teaching curriculums have been changed frequently, foreign language teachers and course hours have been increased, and preparatory classes have been opened in universities to solve the problem. Still, the problem continues (Polat, 2018).

The current international English proficiency index for 2024, based on the test results of 2.1 million adults, shows that Türkiye ranks 65th out of 116 countries (English Proficiency Index [EPI], 2024). Unfortunately, Türkiye ranks 71 out of 123 countries, indicating a sharp drop (EPI, 2025). The rankings obtained from international exams such as IELTS and TOEFL in Türkiye indicate similar results. As of 2022, IELTS test takers' average score in Türkiye is 6.1. The world average is 6.5 (IELTS, 2022). TOEFL IBT statistical results for 2024 show that Türkiye's average score is 79 out of 120 (TOEFL IBT, 2024). These scores remain below global averages. Likewise, the results of national exams such as Foreign Language Test (YDT), English Language Teaching Field Knowledge Test (ÖABT), and Electronic Foreign Language Exam (e-YDS) also reveal similar results. The 2023 YDT exam results show that the average score of candidates in Türkiye was 36.48 out of 80 questions (Measurement, Selection and Placement Center [ÖSYM], 2023b). The 2023 ÖABT English test results reveal that the average score of candidates was 30.197 out of 75 questions (ÖSYM, 2023a). Finally, the results of ÖSYM's 2017 e-YDS English exam evaluation report published in 2018 demonstrate that the e-YDS average for the last ten terms until 2017 was 60.87 out of 100 (ÖSYM, 2018). In fact, the national benchmarks for language exams may change. For example, a graduate student must take a minimum score of 55 out of 100 on YDS or e-YDS to be able to start his Ph.D education. Similarly, an assistant professor needs to get 55 out of 100 from national foreign language exams to be able to apply for associate professor position. Despite frequent changes in education system, it is clear that the failure to achieve a permanent improvement in language proficiency necessitates the identification of deficiencies and the development of effective solutions in Türkiye. Measurement and evaluation processes play a critical role in solving these problems in education, and effective management of these processes is the fundamental element in increasing success in language education.

Türkiye has an exam-centered education approach where many high-stakes tests are applied. The High School Entrance Exam (LGS) and the Higher Education Institutions Exam (YKS) are among Türkiye's most common exams regarding their importance and the number of participants. The impact of such exams on learning and teaching has long been debated. In such an exam-oriented system, students are encouraged to learn information only to pass exams. Research indicates that students often fail to transform the information they have learned into long-term knowledge after exams, as performance-oriented and surface learning strategies primarily promote short-term memorization rather than durable understanding (Entwistle, 2009; Roediger & Karpicke, 2006; Soderstrom & Bjork, 2015). Thus, it can be asserted that the exam-focused approach keeps information in short-term memory instead of long-term skills and deep learning. This makes it difficult for students to gain knowledge and competencies they can use in real life.

Researchers have dealt with the concept of washback from different perspectives. Research has been conducted on its impact on language classes (Buck, 1988), teaching (Watanabe, 1996), learning (Cheng, 1998), English examination (Furaidah et al., 2015), curriculum (Alderson & Wall, 1993), teaching materials (Read & Hayes, 2003), policies of applied English department (Shih, 2010), high-stakes examination on out-of-class English learning (Zhan & Andrews,



2014), learning outcomes (Green, 2007), and course design and classroom teaching (Zou & Xu, 2017).

In Türkiye, the washback effect of the LGS exam on English lessons has been addressed in the studies conducted by Çakır (2017), Gömleksiz and Aslan (2017), and Kılıçkaya (2016). The effects of the University Entrance Foreign Language Exam (YDS), the Interuniversity Board Foreign Language Exam (ÜDS), and the Public Personnel Foreign Language Exam (KPDS) are discussed in the studies by Sevimli (2007), Özmen (2011), Akpınar and Cakildere (2013), respectively. In Türkiye, studies on washback mostly focus on the effects of language exams on in-class activities, English curriculum content, teaching materials, teaching techniques and language skills.

Aim and research questions

The present study examines the washback effect of high-stakes exams on academic achievement in English lessons. Thus, the following research questions were sought:

- (1) What are the LGS, LGS-Retest and LGS-Difference Scores of the participants?
- (2) Is there a significant difference between the LGS English achievement scores of the participants and the LGS-Retest and LGS-Difference scores obtained by re-administering the same test four years later, in terms of the high school variable?
- (3) Is there a significant difference between the participants' LGS English achievement scores and the LGS-Retest scores obtained by re-administering the same test four years later?
- (4) Is there a significant difference between the LGS English achievement scores of the participants and the LGS-Retest and LGS-Difference scores obtained by re-administering the same test four years later, in terms of gender variable?
- (5) What is the relationship between the LGS, LGS-Retest and LGS-Difference scores of the participants?

Method

Research design

The present study on the effect of high-stakes exams on students' academic achievement in English lessons was designed following the relational survey. Relational survey research design aims to determine the existence of an interaction between two or more variables and the degree of relationship between variables (Karasar, 2017).

Participants

The study's universe consisted of students who took the LGS exam in the 8th grade in 2020 and who were studying in different types of high schools in the 12th grade as of 2024. The sample consisted of 806 high school students, including 416 females, and 390 males, selected from these high schools using a random sampling method. Participants' demographic information is given in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Variable	Sub-variable	Number (N)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	390	48.4
	Female	416	51.6
	Total	806	100.0
Type of High School	Anatolian High School (AHS)	368	45.7
	Anatolian Imam Hatip High School (AIHHS)	211	26.2
	Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School (VTAHS)	77	9.6
	Science High School (SHS)	64	7.9
	Multi-Program Anatolian High School (MPAHS)	60	7.4
	Social Sciences High School (SSHS)	26	3.2
	Total	806	100.0

Table 1 demonstrates that the majority of the participants continued their education in Anatolian High Schools (n=368; 45.7%), followed by students studying in Anatolian Imam Hatip High School (n=211; 26.2%), Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School (n=77; 9.6%), Science High School (n=64; 7.9%), Multi-Program Anatolian High School (n=60; 7.4%) and Social Sciences High School (n=26; 3.2%). Except for the Social Sciences High School students, all participants are twelfth-grade students. The Social Sciences High School participants were selected from the eleventh grade because they were in the eleventh grade during the 2023-2024 academic year since they had received a year of preparation.

Instruments

June 2020 LGS English part (URL1) test questions were used as a data collection tool. The LGS exam consists of two sessions. The first session starts at 09:30 and the second at 11:30. Table 2 below provides information on the number of questions and duration of the exam sessions, helping to better understand the structure of the LGS exam and its sections.

Table 2. Scope of LGS Exam

Sessions	Section	Number of Questions	Duration
Session 1 (Non-math Lessons)	Turkish	20	75 minutes
	History of the Turkish Revolution and Kemalism	10	
	Religious Culture and Moral Knowledge	10	
	Foreign Language	10	
	Total	50	
Session 2 (Quantitative Lessons)	Science	20	80 minutes
	Mathematics	20	
	Total	40	

* There is a 45-minute break between the first and second sessions.

Table 2 illustrates that 15 minutes are allocated to the English test in the first session of LGS. In the non-math session, ten questions determined for the English test are solved together with other verbal lessons, and an average of 1.5 minutes is given for each question. Considering this time, students are given 15 minutes to complete the English test.

Keeping in mind the information in the above table, the June 2020 LGS-English test questions were given to the participants to solve in 15 minutes. In addition to the exam scores they solved, the actual LGS exam results were also used as data source. Since the English test used as the data collection tool in the research was prepared and implemented by the Ministry of National

Education, its validity and reliability analyses were comprehensively conducted and approved. The KR-20 internal consistency value for the English test section of LGS 2020 was calculated as 0.87 (Ministry of National Education [MoNE], 2020), indicating a high level of reliability. Therefore, the accuracy and reliability of the data collection tool used in the research have been ensured, and the results obtained can be considered reliable.

Data collection

The demographic information form in the first section of the data collection tool allowed to obtain students' name, surname, class and number information. The second section included the questions in the English section of the June 2020 LGS exam. Finally, LGS 2020 statistics were obtained from the Provincial Directorate of National Education. The scores of the students whose results could not be reached through Provincial Directorate were obtained by using their demographic information in the first section under the supervision of an administrator and by using their identity information via e-school. Their June 2020 academic year LGS exam English scores were obtained.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using the SPSS program. Before analysis, univariate (± 3 z values) and multivariate (Mahalanobis distance) extreme value analysis were applied, and seven participants with extreme values were removed from the data set. The normality data of the variables were taken into account to decide the analysis technique. Three criteria were taken into account in the normality tests.

Kolmogorov Smirnov (K-S) and Shapiro Wilk tests

- These tests analyze the null hypothesis that the data group has a normal distribution.
- A significance value greater than 0.05 indicates normal distribution and a significance value less than 0.05 indicates abnormal distribution.
- If the data set is larger than 35, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test is preferred; if it is smaller, the Shapiro-Wilk test is preferred (McKillup, 2011).

Skewness and kurtosis index

- A p-value calculated by dividing the skewness/kurtosis value by its standard error is less than 1.96 for $\alpha=.05$ and 2.58 for $\alpha=.01$, which indicates that the scores are normally distributed (Field, 2009; Hair et al., 1998; Howitt & Cramer, 1997).

Skewness and kurtosis value

- The fact that the skewness and kurtosis values are between (-1, +1) is also seen as evidence that the data set has a normal distribution (Büyüköztürk, 2016b).
- The distribution of the data set that provided the majority of the criteria (Appendix-1) was accepted as normal, and independent groups t-test, related samples t-test, and one-way analysis of variance were applied to this data group.

Effect sizes were calculated for statistically significant differences. For independent groups t-test and paired samples t-test results, effect sizes were evaluated using Cohen's d value (Small: 0.2; Medium: 0.5; Large: 0.8 and above). Additionally, the effect size for one-way ANOVA

results was evaluated using the eta squared η^2 value (Small: 0.01; Medium: 0.06; Large: 0.14 and above) (Ulupınar & İnce, 2021). Pearson correlation analysis was performed to determine the relationship between variables. The table below was used in interpreting the correlation coefficients.

Table 3. Correlation ranges and relationship levels

Correlation Ranges	Relationship Levels
0.00-0.25	Very Weak
0.26-0.49	Weak
0.50-0.69	Medium
0.70-0.89	High
0.90-1.00	Very High

*Ersöz & Ersöz (2019)

Results

Results Related to RQ1

Results related to participants' LGS, LGS-Retest and LGS-Difference Scores are presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics on LGS, LGS-Retest and LGS-Difference scores

Test	N	Min.	Max.	\bar{X}	S.D.
LGS*	806	0.00	100.00	48.01	29.98
LGS-Retest**	806	0.00	100.00	39.31	30.57
LGS-Difference***	806	-30.00	50.00	8.71	14.89

*LGS refers to actual high school entrance exam English section results in 2020.

**LGS-Retest refers to the re-application of high school entrance exam English section originally held in 2020 to the same students in 2024.

***LGS-Difference refers to difference score between actual LGS and LGS-Retest.

Table 4 presents the descriptive statistics of the students regarding the LGS, LGS-Retest, and LGS-Difference tests. Accordingly, the average of the participants who scored between 0 and 100 in the LGS (actual high school entrance exam English section) test was 48.01+29.98. In the second application of the LGS test (LGS-Retest applied four years later), the students scored between 0 and 100, and their average in this test was calculated as 39.31+30.57. In the LGS-Difference scores obtained from the comparison of the LGS and LGS-Retest tests, it is seen that the participants had scores between -30 and 50, and their average for this score was calculated as 8.71+14.89.

Results Related to RQ2

The LGS, LGS-Retest, and LGS-Difference scores of the students participating in the study were compared according to the type of high school they attended. The results regarding the results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Comparison of LGS, LGS-Retest, and LGS-Difference scores by schools

Test	Group	N	\bar{X}	S.D.	F	p	η^{2***}	Difference
LGS	AHS ⁽¹⁾	368	46.68	29.16	73.80	<0.001*	0.32	1-2*,1*-3,1-6*,2*-3,2*-4,2*-5,2-6*,3-6*,4-6*,5-6*
	SSHS ⁽²⁾	26	85.38	8.11				
	AIHHS ⁽³⁾	211	35.26	23.18				
	VTAHS ⁽⁴⁾	77	42.86	23.33				
	MPAHS ⁽⁵⁾	60	39.67	20.75				
	SHS ⁽⁶⁾	64	96.56	5.11				
	Total	806	48.01	29.98				
LGS-Retest	AHS ⁽¹⁾	368	36.63	28.11	82.24	<0.001*	0.34	1-2*,1*-3,1-6*,2*-3,2*-4,2*-5,3-6*,4-6*,5-6*
	SSHS ⁽²⁾	26	85.00	17.94				
	AIHHS ⁽³⁾	211	26.97	23.63				
	VTAHS ⁽⁴⁾	77	34.16	24.67				
	MPAHS ⁽⁵⁾	60	32.33	21.10				
	SHS ⁽⁶⁾	64	89.53	12.01				
	Total	806	39.31	30.57				
LGS-Retest-1	AHS ⁽¹⁾	368	37.73	0.74	10.29	<0.001**	0.06	1-2*,1-6*,2*-3,2*-4,2*-5,3-6*,4-6*,5-6*
	SSHS ⁽²⁾	26	54.19	2.88				
	AIHHS ⁽³⁾	211	37.48	1.01				
	VTAHS ⁽⁴⁾	77	38.41	1.62				
	MPAHS ⁽⁵⁾	60	39.22	1.84				
	SHS ⁽⁶⁾	64	49.50	2.02				
	Total	806	37.73	1.01				
LGS-Difference	AHS ⁽¹⁾	368	10.05	15.25	2.55	0.027*	0.02	1-2*
	SSHS ⁽²⁾	26	0.38	18.00				
	AIHHS ⁽³⁾	211	8.29	14.04				
	VTAHS ⁽⁴⁾	77	8.70	15.25				
	MPAHS ⁽⁵⁾	60	7.33	15.39				
	SHS ⁽⁶⁾	64	7.03	12.04				
	Total	806	8.71	14.89				

* One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA)** Covariance Analysis *** Eta squared effect size

Table 5 shows the comparison results of LGS, LGS-Retest, and LGS-Difference scores according to school type. Accordingly, the LGS scores of the students showed a statistically significant difference according to the type of school they attended [F(5.800)=73.80; p<0.001]. Post hoc test (Scheffe Test) results regarding paired group comparisons reveal that students studying in Science High School had statistically significantly higher LGS averages than students in other types of high schools, Social Sciences High School students had statistically significantly higher LGS averages than students in other types of high schools except Science High School, and students studying in Anatolian High School had statistically significantly higher LGS averages than students in Anatolian Imam Hatip High School.

Due to the significant differences between the groups in the first application, the students' LGS-Retest averages were compared after the effect of the first application was eliminated (covariance analysis) and in their current form (one-way analysis of variance). It was determined that the LGS-Retest averages of the students differed significantly according to the school type in both measurements [(F_{current}(5.800)=82.24; p<0.001), (F_{covariance}(5.800)=10.29; p<0.001)]. The results of post hoc tests related to pairwise group comparisons were evaluated in terms of current scores. It was determined that students studying in Science High School had higher averages than students in other types of high schools except Social Sciences High School. Moreover, it was revealed that students studying in Social Sciences High School had statistically significantly higher LGS-Retest averages than students in other types of high schools except for Science High School, and students studying in Anatolian High School had statistically significantly higher LGS-Retest averages than students in Anatolian Imam Hatip High School. The results of post hoc tests related to pairwise group comparisons were examined

regarding scores adjusted from the first application. It was found that students studying in Science High School had statistically significantly higher LGS-Retest averages than students studying in other types of high schools except Social Sciences High School, and students studying in Social Sciences High School had statistically significantly higher LGS-Retest averages than students studying in other types of high schools except Science High School.

It was examined whether the LGS-Difference scores obtained from the LGS and LGS-Retest tests differed according to the school type, and it was determined that the LGS-Difference scores differed according to the school attended ($F(5.800)=2.55$; $p=0.027$). Post hoc tests for pairwise group comparisons show that this difference occurs at a statistically significant level between students studying at Anatolian High School and students studying at Social Sciences High School. It was found that students at Social Sciences High School had lower difference scores; in other words, they showed similar success levels between the applications.

Table 5 illustrates that the difference between schools in LGS and LGS-Retest has a large effect size. The effect size is smaller in LGS-Difference scores. This shows that school differences are strongly evident in LGS and LGS-Retest, but this effect is lower in LGS-Difference scores.

Figure 1 presents data on LGS, LGS-Retest, LGS-Retest (1), and LGS-Difference scores of students according to the type of school they attend.

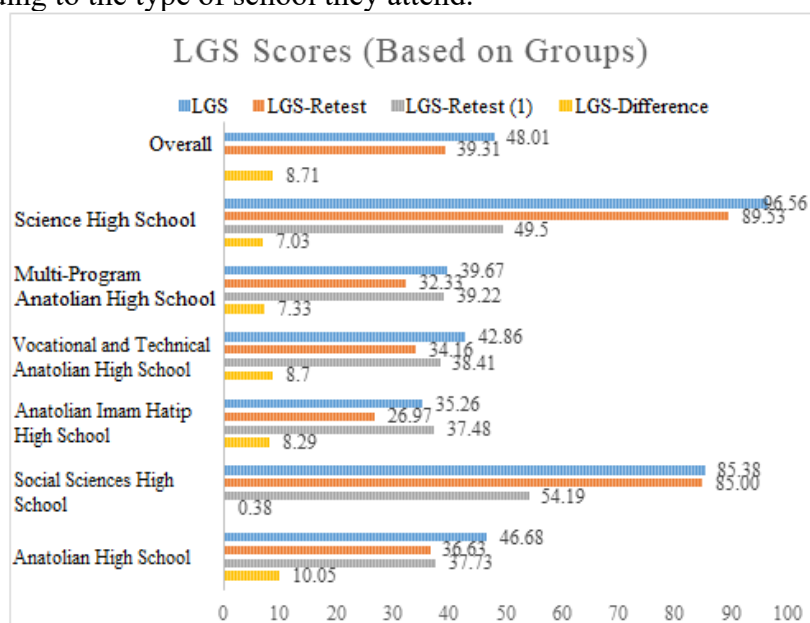


Figure 1. LGS scores (Based on Groups)

Figure 1 demonstrates that regarding LGS-Retest scores, Science High School and Social Sciences High School received the highest scores with 89.53 and 85.00, respectively. However, it is understood that Social Sciences High School received the lowest score in terms of LGS-Difference scores with 0.38, and the LGS and LGS-Retest scores of the students are close to each other. The group with the lowest LGS-Retest score is Imam Hatip Anatolian High School, with 26.97. LGS-Retest (1), the scores obtained by the students from the LGS-Retest test were evaluated by covariance analysis after removing the effect of the first application. As a result of this analysis, it was seen that the scores of the students differed significantly according to the type of school.

Results Related to RQ3

Results regarding the time-dependent changes in the scores students received from the LGS exam, and the scores they received from the LGS-Retest exam are given in Table 6.

Table 6. Findings on the change in LGS and LGS-Retest over time

Group	Test	N	\bar{X}	S.D.	t	p*	d**
Anatolian High School	LGS	368	46.68	29.16	12.64	<0.001	0.67
	LGS-Retest	368	36.63	28.11			
Anatolian Imam Hatip High School	LGS	211	35.26	23.18	8.58	<0.001	0.57
	LGS-Retest	211	26.97	23.63			
Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School	LGS	77	42.86	23.33	5,01	<0.001	0.53
	LGS-Retest	77	34.16	24.67			
Science High School	LGS	64	96.56	5.11	4.67	<0.001	0.58
	LGS-Retest	64	89.53	12.01			
Multi-Program Anatolian High School	LGS	60	39.67	20.75	3.69	<0.001	0.47
	LGS-Retest	60	32.33	21.10			
Social Sciences High School	LGS	26	85.38	8.11	0.11	0.914	--
	LGS-Retest	26	85.00	17.94			
Overall	LGS	806	48.01	29.98	16.61	<0.001	0.57
	LGS-Retest	806	39.31	30.57			

* Paired samples t-test ** Cohen d effect size

Table 6 shows the changes in LGS and LGS-Retest over time, both school-based and overall. Accordingly, a statistically significant difference was found between the LGS and LGS-Retest means of the students in both school-based comparisons and general comparisons. The score differences between the LGS and LGS-Retest were observed to have a medium effect size in all schools except the Social Sciences High School. Since no significant difference was found between the scores in the Social Sciences High School, the effect size was not calculated [($t_{SSHS}=0.11;p=0.914$), ($t_{AHS}=12.64;p<0.001$), ($t_{AIHHS}=8.58;p<0.001$), ($t_{VTAHS}=5.01;p<0.001$), ($t_{M PAHS}=3.69;p<0.001$), ($t_{SHS}=4.67;p<0.001$), ($t_{Overall}=16.61;p<0.001$)]. Bare in mind the group averages, it was seen that the students' averages in the first application were higher than the second application in all comparisons. As seen in the test results, it is noteworthy that there was a noticeable decrease in the scores of the students in the LGS-Retest application. Based on this finding, it can be said that the students studying in the Social Sciences High School showed similar success in both applications.

The change in students' scores over time according to the type of school they attend is presented in Figure 2.

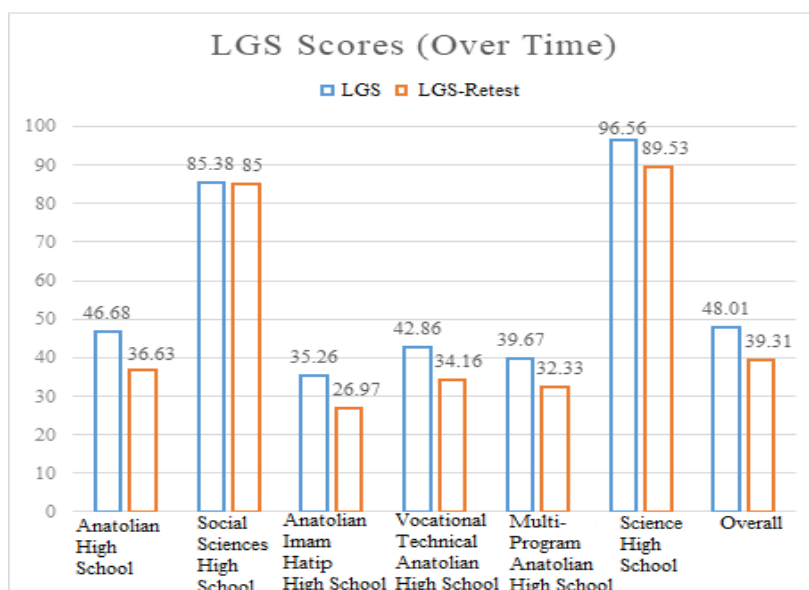


Figure 2. LGS scores (Over Time)

Figure 2 shows that Social Sciences High School's LGS score is 85.38, while its LGS-Retest score is 85.00. This is the group with the least change in the LGS and LGS-Retest scores over time. Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School has the highest change over time, with 42.86 LGS scores and 34.16 LGS-Retest scores.

Results Related to RQ4

LGS, LGS-Retest, and LGS-Difference scores of the students are compared according to their gender in Table 7.

Table 7. Comparison of LGS, LGS-Retest, and LGS-Difference scores by gender

	Gender	N	\bar{X}	S.D.	$t(174)$	p^*	d^{**}
LGS	Male	390	45.59	29.80	-2.23	0.026	0.17
	Female	416	50.29	30.00			
LGS-Retest	Male	390	37.21	30.34	-1.89	0.059	
	Female	416	41.27	30.70			
LGS-Difference	Male	390	8.38	14.75	-0.60	0.549	
	Female	416	9.01	15.03			

* Independent samples t-test ** Cohen d effect size

Table 7 shows a difference in favor of girls in terms of LGS averages of students according to their gender ($t_{LGS}=-2.23$; $p=0.026$). However, this difference is at a relatively small level. LGS-Retest and LGS-Difference scores did not show statistically significant differences according to their gender [$(t_{LGS-Retest}=-1.89$; $p=0.059$), $(t_{LGS-Difference}=-0.60$; $p=0.549)$]. LGS scores of students based on gender are given in Figure 3.

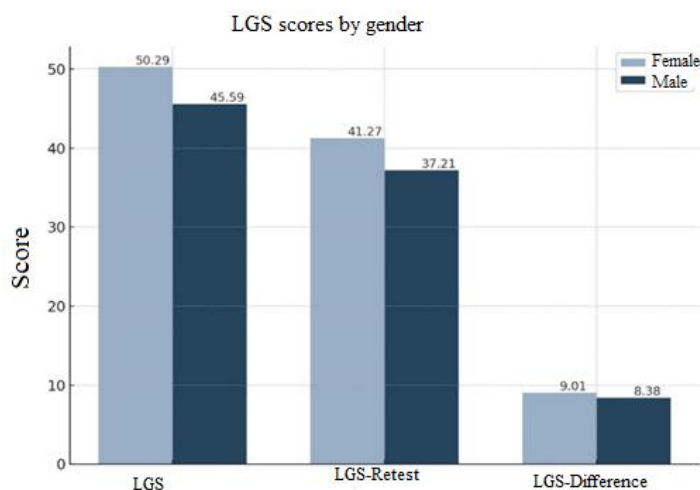


Figure 3. LGS scores by gender

As seen in Figure 3, girls achieved higher achievement than boys in the LGS exam, with 50.29. Similarly, girls achieved higher achievement in the LGS-Retest with 41.27.

Results Related to RQ5

The results showing the relationship between LGS, LGS-Retest, and LGS-Difference Scores are given in Table 8.

Table 8. Correlation findings regarding LGS, LGS-Retest and LGS-Difference scores

Group/School		1	2	3
Anatolian High School	LGS (1)	--		
	LGS-Retest (2)	0.86**	--	
	LGS-Difference (3)	0.33**	-0.20**	--
Social Sciences High School	LGS (1)	--		
	LGS-Retest (2)	0.22	--	
	LGS-Difference (3)	0.23	-0.90**	--
Anatolian Imam Hatip High School	LGS (1)	--		
	LGS-Retest (2)	0.82**	--	
	LGS-Difference (3)	0.27**	-0.33**	--
Vocational and Technical Anatolian High School	LGS (1)	--		
	LGS-Retest (2)	0.80**	--	
	LGS-Difference (3)	0.24**	-0.40**	--
Multi-Program Anatolian High School	LGS (1)	--		
	LGS-Retest (2)	0.73**	--	
	LGS-Difference (3)	0.35**	-0.39**	--
Science High School	LGS (1)	--		
	LGS-Retest (2)	0.21**	--	
	LGS-Difference (3)	0.22**	-0.91**	--
Overall	LGS (1)	--		
	LGS-Retest (2)	0.88**	--	
	LGS-Difference (3)	0.21**	-0.28**	--

**Significance at 0.05 confidence level

Table 8 reveals the correlations between LGS, LGS-Retest, and LGS-Difference scores for different types of high schools. In general, strong and positive correlations were found between LGS and LGS-Retest scores, while mostly negative correlations were observed between LGS-Difference scores and LGS-Retest scores. The correlations between LGS and LGS-Difference

scores are generally low and positive. In Science, and Social Sciences High Schools, the negative correlation between LGS-Retest and LGS-Difference scores is much higher, which shows that the score difference of students studying in these high schools is more apparent.

Discussion, Conclusion, and Implications

It was examined whether there was a significant difference between the June 2020 LGS exam English achievement scores of the participants and the LGS-Retest results obtained by re-administering the same test four years later, and it was discovered that the overall average of the students decreased from 48.01 to 39.31. Accordingly, a statistically significant difference was found between the LGS and LGS-Retest averages of the students in both school-based comparisons and general comparisons. Group averages revealed that in all comparisons, the students' averages in the first application were higher than in the second application. As seen in the test results, a noticeable decrease was observed in the students' LGS-Retest application. The fact that the participants' LGS scores were higher than the LGS-Retest scores can be attributed to the fact that there is a compulsory English test in the LGS exam held in the last year of secondary school. Gömleksiz and Aslan (2017) concluded in their study investigating the effect of the TEOG (the Transition from Basic Education to Secondary Education Exam) exam on students' English learning that the exam positively contributed to students' English learning. TEOG exam was conducted in six main lessons including English, and there were 20 questions for each lesson. TEOG was replaced by LGS in 2017. These results reveal that the YKS exam system and its content have a strong negative washback effect on the students' academic achievement in English, since there isn't a compulsory English test section for all participants in YKS.

It can be advocated that national and international studies on washback (Aftab et al., 2014; Çakildere, 2013; Dağtan, 2015; Hatipoğlu, 2016; Polat, 2019, 2020; Ramezaney, 2014; Saltaş, 2020; Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011) mainly focus on the positive and negative washback effects of exam formats on language skills. In other words, these studies emphasize that due to the narrow scope of central exams, candidates develop certain skills (reading). In contrast, other skills (listening, speaking, and writing) are neglected, and they internalize exam-oriented language learning techniques. This view is supported by Xiao et al. (2011). The scholars report in their study on the impacts of the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) in China that the development of students' language skills are overshadowed by high-stakes examinations. Also, in Salehi's et al. (2017) study, the interviewed students revealed that such large-scale tests ignored such language skills as listening and writing; that's, the emphasis was just on reading and language components such as vocabulary and grammar. This point of view is also consistent with Mutereko's (2017) assertion that examinations may cause unintended consequences. The scholar argued that the accountability mechanism produced by examinations may result in giving more importance to subject areas covered in exams and other areas can be overlooked. The present study also presents that students do not give sufficient importance to English lessons during high school because the scope of the YKS exam is narrow; that is, it does not include English test section. The LGS and LGS-Retest test scores remarkably demonstrate that the YKS exam has a negative washback effect on students' academic achievement in English lessons. Similar findings have been frequently presented in both national and international studies, and a strong depth of sources has been created in the relevant literature. The studies by Akpınar and Cakildere (2013), Canlı (2019), Çakildere (2013), Kılıçkaya (2016), Kütük and Avara (2023), Salehi and Yunus (2012), and Sarı (2018) emphasize that although reading skills, grammar and vocabulary improve, listening, speaking and writing skills are ignored. This point is also revealed by Gokturk Saglam (2018) that exam-



oriented system narrows curriculum to the tested skills. In addition, the negative washback of exams on teaching practices has been frequently underlined in studies conducted by Ahmad and Rao (2012), Çelik (2017), Damankesh and Babaii (2015), Karabulut (2007), Nacar Güzelcan (2018), and Sayın and Aslan (2016). The points frequently expressed as negative washback on instructional practices are the adoption of exam-focused teaching and the emphasis on activities aimed at solving questions and learning exam tactics. The above studies are examples of negative washback.

In fact, the studies on the washback effect of exams are not limited to negative washback effects. Scrutinizing the studies that reveal a positive washback effect, it would be sound to say that this effect is due to the scope of the exam. The study by Şentürk (2013) on the KET exam-Key English Test- demonstrates contradictory findings to the findings of the studies that reveal negative washback. The researcher emphasizes that since the exam format is aimed at measuring four language skills, this has been considered both in teaching methodologies and in the exam preparation processes. Instead of a monotonous teaching style as in the classes used for preparation for such exams as YDS, YÖKDİL, KPSS, ÜDS, LYS-5, TEOG where reading skills, grammar and vocabulary are measured, in the school where Şentürk's (2013) study conducted the research, the purpose was to provide a learning environment in which communicative language skills were taken as a basis, classroom interaction was increased, and general language competence was attempted to be achieved.

The present study revealed a significant difference in LGS averages of students in favor of girls according to gender. In the LGS exam held in 2020, female students also had a higher average number of correct answers on the English test. This finding is also consistent with the previously conducted 2018 and 2019 LGS exam data (MoNE, 2020). On the other hand, LGS-Retest and LGS-Difference scores did not show statistically significant differences in terms of gender.

The LGS-Difference scores obtained from the LGS and LGS-Retest tests differed according to the school type. Although the LGS and LGS-Retest scores of the Social Sciences High School students increased in favor of LGS-Retest, there was no statistically significant difference. The fact that the LGS-Retest test score of the Social Sciences High School students is higher than the LGS exam score can be attributed to the fact that they have attended a foreign language preparatory class for one year and that their YKS exam preparation and anxiety have not fully started since they are still in the eleventh grade. So, it can be argued that Social Sciences High School students have similar success in both applications.

There are many reasons why foreign language education in Türkiye cannot meet the expected level and makes learning a foreign language difficult. Problems originating from the education system also have an important place among these factors. The fact that tests or questions regarding foreign languages are not included in the high-stakes exams held after secondary school is one of the main problems. Furthermore, the nature of the centralized exam system has led school administrators and teachers to focus on increasing the exam scores of students and schools. It can be argued that centralized exams have turned into a competition where students, teachers, classes, schools, districts, and even provinces compete with each other rather than just placing students in schools (Büyüköztürk, 2016a). Considering this tendency of school administrators and teachers, it can be concluded that they may not give enough importance to the foreign language course, which is not included in the YKS exam held at the end of the twelfth grade in Türkiye. Families also direct their children to courses that will bring higher scores on the exam (Altun, 2009). Similarly, in their study on how much families care about

lessons related to high-stakes exams, Yurttaş Kumlu and Çobanoğlu (2020) stated that parents attach more importance to courses related to high-stakes exam achievement than lessons unrelated to it. In the LGS examination system introduced after the TEOG exam, the weight coefficients of the subtests changed in favor of Turkish, Mathematics, and Science courses, causing students to give less importance to other lessons, including English (Özdaş, 2019).

Akdoğan (2010) stated that students are so exam-focused that even in preparatory class, they are disinterested in the foreign language they are taught because they think that the exam will negatively affect their lessons. In the 9th, 10th, and 11th grades, students' disinterest in foreign language lessons increases due to exam anxiety, and this situation discourages foreign language teachers' enthusiasm for teaching and makes students lazy. Thus, foreign language lessons have become a subject where students, especially in the twelfth grade, spend time studying for the lessons on the exam. The same study indicates that including English-related questions in the High School Entrance Exams since 2007 has increased students' interest in foreign languages at secondary school.

Teachers may be subject to pressure from almost all school stakeholders (student, parent, administrator) to conduct exam-focused lessons and skip topics that are not on the exam. Moreover, for some high school teachers, YKS success may emerge as an internal pressure factor. In other words, teachers may be subject to internal pressure with the idea that their students must be successful and may hold themselves responsible for their student's performance on the exam. Situations such as these show that the YKS affects the teaching process at school. Of course, these effects may vary depending on the attitudes of teachers, students, and administrators toward the exam (Baştürk & Doğan, 2010).

The literature demonstrates that studies have been conducted based on the opinions of teachers and students about the issue of not including questions from a certain course in the university exam and its effects. In such a study based on teachers' and students' opinions, Tunç and Kozikoğlu (2022) concluded that the absence of English questions in the university entrance exam negatively affected students' motivation to learn English. This situation reveals how the examination system shapes the interest in courses and students' motivation. The study by Can and Işık Can (2014) also revealed that the absence of questions about second foreign languages (usually French and/or German) in university entrance exams negatively affected students' interest in these lessons. The study indicated that most students did not care about foreign language lessons for this reason. Some students stated that they would not choose these lessons (foreign language lessons) if they were not compulsory and that they thought that the time spent on these courses was wasted. In addition, some students stated that they received advice from their teachers that other lessons were more important and that they should focus more on the lessons that had questions on the exam. These views showed how students evaluate lesson choices for university entrance exams. Similarly, in his study titled "Teacher Expectations for an Effective German Teaching", Kırmızı (2009) pointed out that as the exam approached, especially one or two years before the exam, students focused entirely on the university entrance exam and showed no interest in lessons that did not have questions in this exam. Özmat and Senemoğlu (2020) also stated that students were disinterested in the English course because it would not appear in the university entrance exam due to their busy class schedules and exam stress, and they thought they should spend more time on the lessons that would appear in the exam. The common result of the studies conducted by taking the opinions of teachers and students is that if there are no questions related to a lesson in an exam held at the end of a certain level, the student does not want to learn, and the teacher does not want to teach. Alderson and Wall (1993) also argue that negative washback can occur when teachers and students do not



want to teach and learn.

Students have a negative attitude not only towards the lessons that are not included in the exams but also towards the subjects that are not included in the exams. Karaca's et al. (2015) study, which investigated students' views on science subjects not asked in the TEOG exam, concluded that students were not curious about science subjects not asked in the exam and had a negative perspective. Such results reflect students' priorities towards exams and their expectations regarding the exam content. Such studies showing students' attitudes toward lessons and topics not addressed in exams can play an important role in shaping education policies. Similarly, de la Fuente Fernández and Calvo Pascual (2022) investigated the washback of the Spanish university entrance examination on chemistry teaching in upper secondary education. They pointed out that innovative content, which appeared less often in the exams, was disregarded by students. They regarded this as a negative washback of the university entrance exam-PAU. Manjarrés's (2005) study on the impact of students having to answer English-related questions for the first time in the university entrance exam in Colombia on teaching English in the country is important in this sense. The study's data were collected through classroom observation, face-to-face interviews with teachers and students, and an exam administered in class. The study results revealed a strong, positive washback relationship between the English component of the examination and English language teaching. When these last two studies are evaluated together - respectively, students have a negative attitude towards topics that are not asked in the exam, and students have a positive attitude towards a course if it is not a component of an exam and that course later becomes a component of that exam - it can be said that this situation has a positive washback effect.

According to Türkiye's Secondary School English Teaching Curriculum (MoNE, 2018), the eighth-grade English curriculum has been prepared according to the basic user (A2) level. On the other hand, the High School English Teaching Curriculum (2024) requires students to be at the independent user (B2) level in the twelfth-grade English curriculum, which is two levels above the basic user (A2) level. These levels are determined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Considering that these levels and secondary and high school English teaching curricula are organized in accordance with the spiral programming approach, the LGS-Retest scores of the twelfth-grade high school students are expected to be higher than the LGS scores. However, the results of the present study show the opposite. The LGS average of the students participating in the study decreased from 48.01 to 39.31 in the June 2020 academic year.

Political decision-makers or school administrators often use exams to implement educational policies because they believe exams have great power (Shohamy, 2001). This belief that changes in education can be made through exams has led to exams being frequently used as top-down educational reform strategies. In 1993, Hong Kong exam authorities made major changes to the existing Hong Kong English Certificate of Education exam to have a positive washback effect on classroom teaching activities. This change in the exam program resulted in changes in the existing teaching practices of teachers in Hong Kong secondary schools (Cheng, 1998). It can be said that students create a "learning program" suitable for themselves and study accordingly based on the answer to the question "Teacher, are we responsible for this in the exam?"

In conclusion, the results of the present study show that students' achievement in LGS and LGS-Retest exams is affected by various factors such as gender, school type and examination system. In particular, the decrease observed in LGS and LGS-Retest tests reveals that the YKS

examination system and its content have a negative impact on students' English achievement, as there isn't English test section for all participants. This fact shows that the effects of high-stakes examination systems on education should be carefully evaluated, and the scope of the examinations should be restructured by taking into account their effects on students' academic performance. Education policies and examination systems should be organized to support students' language skills and general academic achievement. In this context, it can be concluded that examinations should measure students' knowledge and skills and serve as strategic tools to increase the quality of education and student motivation.

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