

ENGLISH NATIONAL EXAMINATION IN INDONESIA: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

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1. INTRODUCTION

As a country with a centralized education system, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture, apart from its never-ending controversies (Furaidah *et al.*, 2015), administer a national examination (popularly known as *Ujian Nasional*) for secondary schools all over the country annually. This national examination is a high-stake test (Saukah, 2015; Amrein & Berliner, 2002) and is a standardized test used by the Indonesian government to improve the national education standards (Depdiknas, 2007). Up to 2014, students' score in the national examination functioned as part of the basis for the students' graduation. However, since 2015 schools have been given a stronger authority to make decisions about their students' graduation (Saukah, 2013, 2015; Sulisty, 2009). In this case, the result of the national examination is used by the government to map the quality of education of the schools in Indonesia and as a basis to selection purposes at the higher level of education (Saukah & Cahyono, 2015).

In the national examination in Indonesia, English has been included as a subject since its first inception in 2002/2003 academic year as officially stated in the Ministry of Education Decree No. 34/2007 (Furaidah *et al.*, 2015; Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011; Sulisty, 2009). This, as many studies reported, has been a subject that most students failed to successfully pass given the fact that English is a foreign language (EFL) which is not utilized their daily communication (Sabrina, 2016) therefore their mastery of this language is usually low (Sulistiyo, 2009; Alwasilah, 2001). In addition, it is reported that

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the validity and reliability of questions in the English National Examination (ENE) have so far been questioned (Umam, 2014) and is also said that the English National Examination (ENE) causes a ‘curriculum narrowing’ practice, that is, a situation in which teachers only teach their students the tested materials in the national examination (Sukah & Cahyono, 2015; Saukah & Widiati, 2015; Au, 2007). In this case, the teachers only select certain materials in the text books they used and left other materials which were considered irrelevant to the examination (Umam, 2014). Thus, this chapter sets out to provide a critical review of the English National Examination (ENE) in Indonesian context. The first section of this chapter discusses the national examination in general including its history, controversy, purpose and essential features. The second part deals with English National Examination (ENE) especially with its validity, reliability and washback issues as reported in studies conducted by experts working in the field. The last section discusses the possibility of implementing an alternative assessment of performance based assessment (Henceforth PBA) either to replace or to supplement the English National Examination in the Indonesian context.

This study is useful as it provides a potential alternative assessment for English national examination (performance- based assessment) in Indonesian context given the fact that until today the test items given is still in the multiple choice form for this subject which simply test students’ cognition and left both their affective and psychomotor domains untested. Thus, this study also provides insights from critically evaluating on past centralized examination in that it helps to reveal problems surrounding the administration of such a centralized test and thus make especially the English national examination better for today and in the future.

2. NATIONAL EXAMINATION: HISTORY, CONTROVERSY, PURPOSE AND CURRENT DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Brief History and Controversy

The national examination began even before the Indonesian independence (Murtiana, 2011) which was termed as *Ujian Negara* or State Examination which was lasted until 1972 (Afrianto, 2008). Later, in 1980, the term was