Exploring L2 Learners’ Attitude towards High-stakes and Low-stakes Tests

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Abstract: The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether Iranian EFL learners’ attitude differ significantly towards high-stakes and low-stakes tests. To that end, 232 male and female participants responded to Persian version of Test Attitude Survey designed by Arvey, Strickland, Drauden, and Martin (1990). The questionnaire included 42 Likert items distributed unequally between eight factors of motivation, lack of concentration, belief in tests, comparative anxiety, test ease, external attribution, future effect, and preparation. The third grade high school English language graduation examination was selected as an instance of high-stakes tests and the end-of-the-course, teacher-made tests of general English course at university level were considered as representative of low-stakes ones. The questionnaires were scored on Likert scale and the gathered data were subjected to the nonparametric Mann-Whitney U-test. The findings of this study illustrated that, in general, there seems to be no significant difference between these two groups of test takers’ attitudes towards high-stakes and low-stakes tests. Besides, regarding the eight attitudinal factors, only four factors, namely motivation, lack of concentration, future effect, and preparation were found significantly different.

Key Words: attitude, language learners, high-stakes tests, low-stakes tests, Test Attitude Survey (TAS)

1. Introduction

After many years of research, testing second or foreign language learners’ abilities still remains a controversial issue. Many studies have been done to investigate different aspects of language testing. Accordingly, issues such as different kinds of language tests as well as pertinent statistical features of such tests are now widely known by many second or foreign language teachers and test developers. However, as the new millennium is believed to be the era of learner-centeredness and learner empowerment (e.g., Waters, 2009; Broadfoot, 2009), learners’ roles needs to be emphasized more in testing in general, and in language testing in particular. In addition, language learning is a dynamic process in which “affective variable influence language achievement and achievement and experiences in language learning can influence some affective variable” (Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic, 2004, p. 1).

In this line, as Scott (1986, p.112) states “It is important to consider students’ emotional reactions to language tests”, learners’ attitude towards tests which yield meaningful consequences (high-stakes tests) and tests which seem to have little or no consequence (low-stakes tests), seem to play a significant role. The reason is that test taking attitude is directly related to test performance (Arvey, Strickland, Drauden, & Martin, 1990), and might, therefore, affect the validity of inferences drawn on the basis of the scores of the administered test (Schmit
To date, many investigations have been done to shed light on the issues of high stakes and low-stakes testing and learners’ attitude separately. For example, Goertz and Duffy (2003) provide some positive aspects of taking high-stakes examinations and Madaus (1988) mentions some disadvantages of such an approach. Moreover, merits and demerits of low-stakes testing could be found in Heaton (1988), Wise and Demars (2003), Cole and Bergin (2005), etc. On the other hand, some authors like McCarthy and Goffin (2003) investigated the effect of test taking attitude on test taking performance in general. So, as it can be seen from the foregoing discussion, all the three concepts of learners’ attitude, high-stakes, and low-stakes testing have been worked on by different investigators with their own points of view; nevertheless, there is almost no specific study in which the relationship between these three concepts is identified and discussed.

Accordingly, the present study was an attempt to examine learners’ attitude towards high-stakes and low-stakes testing. In this study, Iranian university students’ attitudes towards the end-of-the-course, teacher-made achievement tests, as an example of low-stakes tests (see Goertz & Duffy, 2003; McKay, 2006) were compared with Iranian high school third grade students’ attitudes towards their English language graduation examination, as an example of high-stakes tests (see Horn, 2003; Cole, 2007). The present study tried to compare test takers’ attitudes towards low-stakes and high-stakes testing in order to describe the origin of negative or/and positive attitudes by explaining merits and demerits of both kinds and to suggest the ways by which test developers can devise tests that inculcate more positive feelings in learners toward language tests.

1.1. Research Questions
To accomplish the purpose of this study, the following research questions were proposed:

Q1: Do Iranian EFL learners develop significantly different attitudes towards high-stakes and low-stakes tests?
Q2: Which attitudinal factors do Iranian EFL learners develop differently towards high-stakes and low-stakes tests?

2. Review of the Related Literature
2.1. Attitude
Attitude is defined as “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (Eagly & Chaiken 1993, as cited in Curran & Rosen 2006, p. 137). Similarly, Celuch, Black and Warthan (2009) believe that attitudes “consist of evaluations of objects or activities... they are typically defined in terms of favorable or unfavorable perceptions associated with aspects of objects or activities” (p. 32).

In addition, it can be said that strongly held attitudes are associated with greater motivation to process information related to an attitude object. “Attitude is an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred on the basis of the individual’s beliefs or opinions about the referent” (Gardner & Lambert, 1959, as cited in Spolsky, 1989, p. 149). There are two significant kinds of attitudes (in language learning): attitudes towards the people who speak the
target language, and attitudes towards the practical use of the language being learned (Eagly & Chaiken 1993, as cited in Curran & Rosen 2006). Language attitudes and orientation lead to motivation which in turn accounts for success on second language learning (Spolsky, 1989).

In the context of applied linguistics, it could be said that learners’ attitudes toward a foreign language play significant roles in learners’ success in a foreign language setting. Moreover, there are some substantial relationship between learners’ attitudes and their learning outcome and language proficiency (Mahdavi-Zafarghandi, 1991).

2.1.1. The Effect of Test Taking Attitude on Test Taking Performance

Examining the students’ test-taking attitudes is important, since they may be related to actual test performance. It is believed that extreme levels of test-taking attitudes (e.g., high levels of anxiety and/or low levels of motivation) may have detrimental effects on test performance, resulting in scores that may not accurately reflect an individual’s true abilities (Arvey et al., 1990). Examinee feedback might be obtained with respect to various aspects of testing EFL, including: the testing situation (e.g., emotional atmosphere, physical facilities and environment, etc.), the test (e.g., perceived fairness, readability and comprehensibility of items, perceived interest of test content, etc.), and the individual examinee (e.g., anxiety and emotional reactions, motivations, attributions of success/failure, achievement expectancies, test attitudes and preferences, etc.) (Zeidner & Bensoussan, 1988; Scott, 1986).

If attitudes toward tests are related to test performance, then to the extent that they result in less accurate measurement of a person’s level on the construct of interest, they may ultimately result in the selection of a less promising set of individuals (McCarthy & Goffin, 2003, p. 447). Ames and Archer (1988) investigated the difference between performance goal orientation and mastery goal orientation. Performance goal orientation could be associated with norm-reference testing, while mastery goal orientation would be related criterion-reference testing. They suggest that students may be more willing to pursue challenging task, have positive attitude toward the situation, and use more learning strategies, when they perceive emphasis on mastery goals. On the other hand, when they perceive emphasis on performance goals, they will develop negative attitude. Scott (1986) investigated learners’ attitudes towards oral tests and found that testing situation might have negative effects on their emotional state; moreover, anxiety and nervousness could have detrimental effects on their performance. On the contrary, having examined students’ attitudes towards written and oral testing modes, Zeidner and Bensoussan (1988) found no significant correlations between test takers’ attitudes and their test performance.

2.1.2. Relationship between Attitude and Attitudinal Factors

Arvey et al. (1990) designed a questionnaire which is purported to be able to measure the attitudes and opinions of the test takers. Eight attitudinal factors are thoroughly looked upon using Test Attitude Survey (TAS): Motivation (10 questions), 2. Lack of concentration (4 questions), 3. Belief in tests (4 questions), 4. Comparative anxiety (10 questions), 5. Test ease (4 questions), 6. External attribution (5 questions), 7. General need achievement (3 questions) 8. Future effect (3 questions), and 9. Preparation (2 questions). This item pool is claimed to be good reflection of attitudinal components of test taking. In addition, literature says that these attitudinal factors could function as a network shaping the test takers’ overall attitudes. For instance, belief in test might have major impacts on motivation and pretest reactions to the test, and these reactions are expected to influence performance on that particular test (Chan, Schmitt,
Sacco, & Deshon, 1998); test consequences would also have major influence on test takers’ motivation (Baumert & Demmrich, 2001); one source of the lack of concentration might be high debilitating anxiety level (Spolsky, 1989; Birenbaum, 2007).

2.2. High-stakes Testing

High-stakes test, like any test, is a sample of items used to make decisions and inferences about people or institutions (Madaus, 1988), and to improve teaching and learning (Bishop, 2005). The difference is that “high-stakes decisions are likely to have major impacts on the lives of large number of individuals, or on large programs” (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 96). Since high-stakes decisions are not easily reversed, the decision errors cannot be easily corrected; thus, examiners have to be careful about these “life-changing implications” of the testing outcome for the test takers (Roever, 2001).

Although different scholars have their own definition of high-stakes testing and high-stakes tests, a general consensus might be found among them: high-stakes tests are mainly defined as tests which are consequential, i.e. having at least some academic or other “meaningful” or important consequences (Cole, 2007; Cole & Bergin 2005; Von der Embse, 2008) for stakeholders who are affected by assessment procedure itself or by the decisions made on the basis of test results (McKay, 2006). The key stakeholders of test results could be students, teachers, administrators, schools, districts, policy makers, and parents (Abu-Alhija, 2007; Von der Embse, 2008); however, of all stakeholders, test takers have the highest stakes (Hamp-Lyons, 2000). Consequences of high-stakes test for students may vary across different testing situations. “The use and consequences of the tests determine the level of ‘stakes’ associated with the assessment system” (Goertz & Duffy, 2003, p. 6). Any kind of formal tests (McKay, 2006), for example, high school graduation examinations (Cole, 2007; Cole & Bergin, 2005; Horn, 2003), statewide assessment to make certification decisions (Goertz & Duffy, 2003; Roever, 2001), annual standardized tests administered in specific educational levels (Park, 2009) have different consequences for different individuals. Similarly, Wheeler (2005) considers grade promotion and receiving diploma at graduation as two important consequences for the students.

2.2.1. High School External Graduation Examinations

High-stakes tests are used for different purposes and have various forms. One of the widespread kinds of these tests is high school external graduation examination test (Cole, 2007; Cole & Bergin, 2005). Such tests are becoming tools for making student level high-stakes decisions like graduation from high schools (Horn, 2003), and are mainly associated with a cutoff score, which is defined externally, to be achieved by students (Cole, 2007). Bishop (2005) differentiates between three categories of such tests: voluntary curriculum-based external graduation exam systems, universal curriculum-based external graduation exam systems, and minimum competency tests.

In Iran, it can be said that high school graduation examinations are the fusion of the two categories, i.e. universal curriculum-based external graduation exam systems, and minimum competency tests. The reason is that all student (not merely those who decide to continue their education) have to take exams in all fields (including foreign language), the result of which have significant coefficients in their score of entrance university exams; besides, these results are indicatives of the learners’ ability to pass the externally set criteria in order for them to receive their high school diploma and enter the pre-university courses. Failing on these tests will result in
mandatory summer school (Horn, 2003), probably re-participation in the classes of the same high school grade for an additional year (grade retention), and in extreme cases, high school dropouts.

2.3. Low-stakes Testing

In contrast to high-stakes tests, low-stakes (or non-consequential) ones are those which results have little or no (meaningful) bearing for the stakeholders (Wise et al., 2005; Cole, 2007; Cole & Bergin, 2005; Phelps, 2007). Low-stakes decisions “have relatively minor impact on the lives of relatively small numbers of individuals, or small programs, and can generally be reversed quite easily” (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 97). McKay (2006) believes that if large-scale tests are not designed to provide data to administrators and parents, they could be regarded as low-stakes tests. Such tests could range from tests for research purposes, with no consequence at all (Jamieson, 2005) to teacher-made achievement tests, end-of-year exams and “pre-placement tests for students preparing to enroll in a foreign language program or a university in a foreign country” (Roever, 2001), which have much lower stakes for tests takers as the major stakeholders. In the case of low-stakes tests, it is claimed that students are less motivated to put best efforts to their test (Wise & Demars, 2003; Wise et al., 2005; Cole & Bergin, 2005). Arvey et al. (1990) consider all these variables, namely test consequences, motivation and effort, as instances of attitudinal factors.

2.3.1. Teacher-made Achievement Tests

Teachers make assessments of their students’ learning everyday by asking questions to notify any misunderstanding and/or misconceptions, or by observing how students make use of materials; additionally, they can assess them more formally on a regular basis to improve students’ learning (National Research Council, 2003). As a prototypical example of low-stakes tests, teacher-made achievement tests are widely used in almost every classroom to gauge students’ achievements of educational goals at different levels. Such tests are prepared and carried out by teachers in the classroom (McKay, 2006). Teachers use this kind of tests to plan instruction, guide students’ learning, and place students in special programs (Goertz & Duffy, 2003). They could be considered as valid tools for measuring students’ achievements only “when they are planned carefully in relation to other elements in a learning program” (Davis, 1968, p. 155). Davis defines these other elements as being related to subject matter, kinds of learning, and learning activities. Genesee and Upshur’s (1996) framework for classroom-based evaluation involves identifying evaluation purposes, collecting information, identifying information, and making decisions.

In order to improve the quality of low-stakes tests (mainly teacher-made achievement tests), Davis (1968) suggests various solutions: course materials have to be analyzed to interpret kinds of learning; these kinds of learning and representative samples of content area must be reflected in test items; tentatively devised items should be evaluated; scoring procedure needs to be specified, and different parts of a test required to be weighted according to their relative importance. Tests items need to be interesting for learners; in addition, feedback should be given to test takers regarding their performance (Wise & Demars, 2003).
3. Method
3.1. Participants
To accomplish the objectives of the current study, 232 male and female Iranian EFL learners (aged from 17 to 23) were selected. The high-stakes test takers were chosen from 19 high schools of various districts of Tehran (they took the tests at 4 examination centers). The others were those BA students who had just passed their end-of-the-course, teacher-made achievement tests (low-stakes tests) at three universities, namely Iran University of Science and Technology, Allameh Tabatabai, and Azad University (Karaj branch). It should be noted that although their fields of study were different, the latter group of students (like their high-stakes counterparts) were those who participated in their general English, not ESP, courses. The reason was to keep congruence between these two tests, i.e. high school English language graduation examination and end-of-the-course, teacher-made achievement tests. However, their proficiency levels were not pertinent to the overall scope of this study.

The participants were chosen through two-stage cluster sampling. In the first stage, educational institutions were chosen, and in the second, students were chosen from each institution. The selection procedure is called cluster sampling and is classified as a kind of random sampling by Farhady (1995).

3.2. Instrumentation
The main instrument in this study was Test Attitude Survey (TAS), designed and validated by Arvey et al. (1990). Since this questionnaire was devised to gauge test takers’ attitudes toward employment tests, some minor modifications, under some experts’ supervisions, seemed necessary. These experts were two university professors. The basic form of this questionnaire consists of 45 questions pertinent to 9 attitudinal factors (or scales): Motivation (10 items), Lack of Concentration (4 items), Belief in Tests (4 items), Comparative Anxiety (10 items), Test Ease (4 items), External Attribution (5 items), General Need Achievement (3 items), Future Effects (3 items), and Preparation (2 items). The factor General Need Achievement was left out on the basis of the assumption that it did not differ across the two groups; it was general not specific to one set of questions. Then, to determine the internal consistency of the new TAS, two months before the present study, a pilot study was conducted among 55 participants which were randomly selected from Iran University of Science and Technology, Tehran; Accordingly, Cronbach’s coefficient was calculated and yielded a reliability estimate of 0.91. This result indicated that the new TAS as a whole was a measure of high internal consistency and respectable temporal stability.

Before administration, the researchers translated the questionnaire into Persian (see Apendix B), and the translated version was then Back-translated it into English by four M.A students and reviewed thereafter in order to eliminate any mismatch and misunderstanding. The answers were measured on a 5-point Likert scale structure. The answered questionnaires were scored in the way that higher marks indicated more favorable attitudes.

In order to investigate learners’ attitude towards high-stakes and low-stakes testing, two examples of such tests were also needed. Different scholars categorize high school graduation examinations as high-stakes tests (e.g., Horn, 2003; Cole, 2007; Cole & Bergin, 2005). On the other hand, end-of-the-course, teacher-made achievement tests are viewed as low-stakes ones (Davis, 1968). Although these tests have their own consequences (they are low-stakes tests, not no-stakes ones), their stakes are much lower for the test takers than their high-stakes counterpart.
These tests are widely used in almost every classroom to gauge students’ achievements of educational goals at different levels. Such tests are prepared and carried out by teachers in the classroom (McKay, 2006).

### 3.3. Procedure

To accomplish the goals of the present study, the high school graduation examination and end-of-the-course teacher achievement tests were considered, namely, as high-stakes and low-stakes tests. At the next step, a valid and reliable instrument which was thoroughly designed was needed to gauge learners’ attitudes towards the above-mentioned tests. Fortunately, such a device was available: Arvey et al. (1990) devised TAS to measure attitudes and opinions of test takers toward the tests they just took. The target schools and universities in this study were selected based on the availability. With some minor modifications, the translated version of TAS was administered to the participants immediately after they took their tests. Participants were told that they had to answer the questionnaires regarding the English tests they had just passed (this piece of information was also declared on the starting section of the questionnaires). After gathering all questionnaires, they were carefully sieved in order to get rid of the inappropriately answered ones. By crossing out 22 incomplete and carelessly completed questionnaires, 210 students participated in the study: 88 students answered the questions about a form of low-stakes tests, i.e. end-of-the-course teacher-made English language achievement tests, and 122 ones answered questions regarding the high-stakes test they had just performed on, i.e. high school English language graduation examination.

Using 5-point Likert scale structures made it possible for the researchers to compare and contrast the remaining 210 questionnaires. The answered questionnaires were checked by two individuals in order to remove any mistake in scoring procedure and adding the points provided to each question. The gathered data were analyzed by SPSS package (version 13) and research hypotheses were investigated using Mann-Whitney U-tests. The obtained results will be thoroughly discussed to provide a clearer picture of the test takers’ attitudinal dispositions associated with the administered tests.

### 3.4. Design and Data Analysis

The present study involved no experimental manipulation of naturally occurring phenomena. Accordingly, following Seliger and Shohamy (1989), the design used in this study was ‘Descriptive’. Besides, the design is classified as the ‘ex post facto’ by Hatch and Farhady (1982), since the focus is on the type and degree of relationship rather than cause and effect. “The researcher has no control over what has already happened to the students. The treatment…has been given prior to the research project” (p. 26).

The schematic representation would be:

\[
\begin{array}{cc}
G_1 & T_1 \\
G_2 & T_1 \\
\end{array}
\]

Once data had been gathered, it was analyzed by the SPSS package (version 13). Firstly, the data was analyzed through descriptive statistics, and secondly, statistical analysis was conducted through independent Mann-Whitney U-test (in order to investigate the research questions) on the obtained data. In the quantitative data analysis, a significant level of 0.50 ($p < 0.50$) was set up.
4. Results

4.1. Investigating the Research Questions

To investigate the two research questions of the current study, a Mann-Whitney U-test was applied to the data set. The main assumption underlying the test is that the data is observed in ordinal scale (Bruin, 2006). Since this test does not assume the equality of variances (Choudhury, 2010), there is no need to run tests such as Levene’s Test of Equality of Error Variances. Descriptive statistics and ranks pertinent to the gathered data are represented in Tables below:

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the responses which all participant provided in TAS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Std. Deviation</th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Maximum</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>39.08</td>
<td>6.669</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Concentration</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>12.77</td>
<td>4.228</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belief in Tests</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>10.89</td>
<td>3.420</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comparative Anxiety</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>31.64</td>
<td>7.763</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Ease</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>12.17</td>
<td>3.150</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Attribution</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>15.72</td>
<td>4.603</td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Future Effect</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>9.40</td>
<td>3.118</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>5.65</td>
<td>2.496</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test Taking Attitude</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>137.34</td>
<td>21.617</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Test</td>
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<td>1.42</td>
<td>.495</td>
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<td>2</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the responses which all participant provided to the questionnaire, as a whole, as well as factor by factor. As it was mentioned, the attitude questionnaire consisted of 42 questions distributed unequally between 8 factors: 1. Motivation (10 questions), 2. Lack of concentration (4 questions), 3. Belief in tests (4 questions), 4. Comparative anxiety (10 questions), 5. Test ease (4 questions), 6. External attribution (5 questions), 7. Future effect (3 questions), and 8. Preparation (2 questions). Regarding 5 point Likert scale, one can assume that the maximum score of each questionnaire would be 210.
Table 2 displays the detailed descriptive statistics regarding the answers which the high-stakes test takers provided in TAS. As it is shown, 122 participants were selected from the population who took high school English language graduation examination.

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the participants’ responses who had taken their end of the year teacher-made achievement tests. 88 test takers from this group participated in the study.
Table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>Sum of Ranks</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>High-stakes</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>113.10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low-stakes</td>
<td>88</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Concentration</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Belief in Tests</td>
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<tr>
<td>High-stakes</td>
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<td>Comparative Anxiety</td>
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<td>High-stakes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low-stakes</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>9993.00</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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<tr>
<td>Future Effect</td>
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<td>High-stakes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low-stakes</td>
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<td>83.84</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
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<td>High-stakes</td>
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<td>Test Taking Attitude</td>
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</table>

Rank orders of all test takers’ responses concerning attitude and each attitudinal factor

In Table 4, information related to rank orders for each attitudinal factor and for attitude alone is shown. Number of participants, mean rank, and sum of ranks regarding each factor are represented in detail.

4.1.1. Investigating the First Research Question
The first research question in this study was:

Do Iranian EFL learners develop significantly different attitudes towards high-stakes and low-stakes testing?

According to the results of Mann–Whitney U-test shown in Table 5, the difference between test takers’ attitude towards high-stakes and low-stakes testing with a p value of 0.903 (p=0.90>.05) was found insignificant.
Table 5. The insignificant difference between high-stakes and low-stakes test takers’ attitudes is shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test Taking Attitude</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mann-Whitney U</td>
<td>5315.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilcoxon W</td>
<td>9231.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>-.122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp.Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.903</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although high-stakes test takers indicated higher mean rank (105.93) than low-stakes ones (104.90) (see Table 4), this difference could not be considered significant. As Table 5 shows, the significant level of the two-tailed hypothesis (0.903) is lower than 0.05; this means that the difference between these two groups is not significant within the confidence interval of 95%; thus, the null hypothesis is confirmed. However, as it is illuminated in Table 4, high-stakes test takers with mean rank of 105.93 demonstrated more favorable attitude towards the test they had just passed than those test takers who had passed a low-stake test with a mean rank of 104.90.

4.1.2. Investigating the Second Research Question

The second research question in this study was:

Which attitudinal factors do Iranian EFL learners develop differently toward high-stakes and low-stakes testing?

In order to investigate the second research question, the Mann-Whitney U-test was run to understand whether test takers’ responses to attitudinal factors differ significantly across two groups; apparently, the procedure was repeated 8 times to cover all attitudinal factors. According to the Tables below, participants’ answers were found significantly different for 4 factors on the one hand, and insignificantly different for the other 4 factors on the other hand within the confidence interval of 95%. Detailed test results are provided in following Tables.

Table 6. The significant difference between high-stakes and low-stakes test takers’ motivation is shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motivation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mann-Whitney U</td>
<td>4441.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilcoxon W</td>
<td>8357.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>-2.137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp.Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.033</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 6, concerning the two tailed hypothesis, the difference between test takers’ motivation for high-stakes versus low-stakes tests, with a p value of 0.033 (p=.033 < .05) was significant; in other words, high stakes test takers with a mean rank of 113.10 has higher motivation for doing well on their test than low-stakes test taker with a mean rank of 94.97.
Table 7.
The significant difference between high-stakes and low-stakes test takers’ lack of concentration is shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lack of Concentration</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mann-Whitney U</td>
<td>4089.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilcoxon W</td>
<td>11592.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>-2.953</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp.Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.003</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7 indicates that, with a $p$ value of 0.003 ($p=.003 < .05$), there is a significant difference between the two groups’ level of Lack of Concentration. This means that low-stakes test takers with mean rank of 120.3 lose their concentration less than their high-stakes counterparts with mean rank of 95.2.

Table 8.
The insignificant difference between high-stakes and low-stakes test takers’ beliefs in tests is shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Belief in Test</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mann-Whitney U</td>
<td>5125.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilcoxon W</td>
<td>9041.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>-.562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp.Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.574</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8 indicates no significant difference in test takers’ perception of their Believes in Tests ($p=.574>.05$). Although with the mean rank of 107.49, high-stakes test takers believe more strongly in the test they had taken in comparison to low-stakes test takers with the mean rank of 102.74.

Table 9.
The insignificant difference between high-stakes and low-stakes test takers’ comparative anxiety is shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparative Anxiety</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mann-Whitney U</td>
<td>4852.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilcoxon W</td>
<td>12355.000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>-1.189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asymp.Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.235</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The information in Table 9 confirms the fact that there is no significant difference between the two groups’ level of Comparative Anxiety($p=.235>.05$); however, low-stakes test takers with higher mean rank 111.36 feel less anxiety than high-stakes test takers with mean rank of 101.27.
Table 10. The insignificant difference between high-stakes and low-stakes test takers’ opinions regarding test ease is shown.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Test Ease</th>
<th>Mann-Whitney U</th>
<th>Wilcoxon W</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>Asymp.Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5284.500</td>
<td>9200.500</td>
<td>-.193</td>
<td>.847</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 10 shows that p value of 0.847 exceeds the alpha level of 0.05; thus, the difference between the groups regarding the test ease factor is not significant. Interestingly, High-stakes test takers consider the test they had passed as being easier (mean rank=106.18) as what the low-stakes test takers think (mean rank=104.5).

Table 11. The insignificant difference between high-stakes and low-stakes test takers’ opinions regarding external attribution

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>External Attribution</th>
<th>Mann-Whitney U</th>
<th>Wilcoxon W</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>Asymp.Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4659.000</td>
<td>12162.000</td>
<td>-1.636</td>
<td>.102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the table 11 illustrates, the significant level of the two-tailed hypothesis (0.102) is above 0.05; this shows that the difference between these two groups of test takers is not significant within the confidence interval of 95%. On the other hand, High-stakes test takers contribute their failure to external factors more than what low-stakes test takers do. The related mean ranks are 99.69 and 113.56 respectively.

Table 12. The significant difference between high-stakes and low-stakes test takers’ opinions regarding future effect

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Future Effect</th>
<th>Mann-Whitney U</th>
<th>Wilcoxon W</th>
<th>Z</th>
<th>Asymp.Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3462.000</td>
<td>7378.000</td>
<td>-4.409</td>
<td>.000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12 shows the result of comparison between what these two groups of test takers perceive about the Future Effect of the tests they had taken. As what could be expected, this table illustrates a significant difference concerning the above mentioned factor (p=.000 < .05). As the name implies, high-stakes test takers believe that such tests have greater consequences for their future life and education (mean rank=121.12); on the contrary, the other group’s belief over the Future Effect of low-stakes tests is much lower (mean rank=83.84) (see Table 4).
Table 13 illustrates that the difference between the two groups of test takers’ perception over the preparation factor is significant \((p=.015 < .05)\). The result indicates that high-stakes test takers (mean rank=114.11) prepare themselves more than their low-stakes counterpart (mean rank=93.56).

5. Discussion

In this study, Iranian test takers’ attitudes towards high-stakes and low-stakes testing were investigated, and regarding the first research question, there was found no significant difference between the attitudes test takers demonstrated towards high-stakes and low-stakes tests. Nevertheless, based on the mean ranks presented in Table 4, high-stakes test takers were shown to have more favorable attitudes towards these tests. Since it is claimed that there is a strong relationship between learners’ attitudes and their learning outcome and language proficiency (Mahdavi-Zafarghandi, 1991) and between test takers’ attitudes and their performance (Arvey et al. 1990), test developers need to be mindful of this construct and its related factors in devising a new test, whether it is a high-stakes or a low-stakes one.

Concerning the pertinent attitudinal factors, it was shown that amongst the intended eight factors, four ones were shown to be significantly different across the two groups of participants: motivation, lack of concentration, external attribution, and future effect. In the case of test taking motivation, it is believed that this factor could significantly affect the size of validity coefficients (Salgado, Remeseiro, & Iglesias, 1996) and has positive impacts on test performance (Chan et al., 1998). In this study, high-stakes test takers demonstrated higher motivation; this could be traced into the fact that although any testing format, whether linked to consequences or not, has its impacts on test taking motivation, further, raising the stakes of a test would result in higher motivation and better performance (Amrein & Berliner, 2003). The findings of this study are also in line with Cole (2007), Cole and Bergin’s (2005) points of view that in a non-consequential testing situation, test takers might be less motivated to try their best. This, however, is contrary to Amrein and Berliner’s (2003) argument that high-stakes tests decrease learners’ motivation. The second attitudinal factor represented in the questionnaire was lack of concentration which was demonstrated to be significantly different across the two groups. As the mean ranks show, low-stakes test takers lose their attention during the test less than their high-stakes counterparts. In this study, it could be argued that low-stakes tests which are devised by classroom teachers, involve test takers’ higher perceptual load. This process leaves them no capacity to deal with irrelevant distracters. However, based on the opposite effect of working memory on distraction it would be imagined that high-stakes tests engage higher cognitive control load which results in increased level of distraction (Lavie, 2010). In summary, it could be said that on the one hand,
high-stakes tests involve lower perceptual but higher cognitive control load; on the other hand, low-stakes tests engage higher perceptual but lower cognitive load (Lavie, 2010).

Considering the next factor, belief in tests, no significant difference was demonstrated by the test takers across the two groups. This insignificant difference could be due to the fact that both groups of test takers believe that the tests are at the same level of validity (measuring what it claims to) and fairness (being valid and reliable for all test takers). Since it is said that belief in test would affect test taking attitude, the insignificant difference between the attitudes of these two groups towards high-stakes and low-stakes tests could also be the result of this belief convergence.

The other attitudinal factor which revealed to be different across the two groups, though not significantly so, was comparative anxiety. Contrary to the belief that high-stakes tests convey greater anxiety (Von der Embse, 2008) the findings of this study reported the fact that any testing situation is anxiety provoking. Based on the findings, it could be suggested that although in a context like Iran there is no anxiety reduction program and remedy (Ergene, 2003), if such programs have to be established someday, it would be fruitful to design them for both high-stakes and low-stakes testing situations.

The next attitudinal factor which was illustrated to be slightly different across the two groups of test takers was test ease. One explanation could be that in the context of the present study, teachers have to shoulder all responsibilities themselves: Teachers design tests on the basis of their previous experiences and familiarity with learners and their proficiency levels. There would be no compulsion of applying (time-consuming) test difficulty formulae, which they might not also be knowledgeable enough to use. Though in high-stakes situations, teachers might try their best to devise tests appropriate for all proficiency levels since many of the test takers are unknown. Nevertheless, the procedure provides test takers with the tests which are at almost the same level of difficulty in their opinion, contrary to the fact that high-stakes test takers who had prepared themselves better are expected to demonstrate higher test ease perception. The solution might be establishing teacher training programs where teachers would be helped in coping with different concepts, such as test difficulty, pertinent to examinations.

Regarding the external attribution factor, the difference was not found significant. This means that regarding external factors such as test difficulty, ambiguity of items, time and proctor pressure, environmental elements, and belief in fate and chance (Shepherd & Edelman, 2009), these two groups perceive them as affecting their performance almost similarly.

The last two categories which both indicated to be significantly different across the two groups are future effect and test preparation. As it was expected, high stakes test takers perceive the tests to have more bearings on their future. To elaborate, this could be due to the fact that high-school graduation examinations have exact coefficients in university entrance examination and failing such tests equals grade retention and dropouts (in extreme cases). On the contrary, learners have the opportunity to take English courses in several semesters at university if they fail and consequently have got the chance to take end-of-year teacher-made achievement tests more than just once. In addition, learners at the third grade of high-school make every effort to graduate (probably with the highest marks) and receive their diploma, but passing achievement tests does not bear such major consequences for university learners. The findings of the present study indicate that although test takers recognize the major and minor impacts of high and low-stakes tests respectively, they develop the same level of attitudes towards them. This would mean that both high and low-stakes tests should be under test developers’ concentration.
Regarding test preparation, high-stakes test takers’ higher levels was found significantly different from that of their low-stakes counterparts. There could be a rough explanation: since the former group believes that such tests are more consequential, they generally tend to prepare themselves more for taking the exams. In this case, teachers might provide the test takers with various preparation practices and test taking strategies (Fedore, 2006, as cited in Hoffman & Nottis, 2008). Nonetheless, test preparation activities could be helpful in any testing condition, not only in high-stakes ones.

5. Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications
The findings of this study emphasized the fact that test takers’ attitudes towards high-stakes and low-stakes testing did not differ significantly. In addition, regarding 8 attitudinal factors, the differences of 4 ones (namely lack of concentration, future effect, and preparation) were found significant across the two groups of test takers.

In contrast to the belief that high-stakes tests have to be abandoned (e.g., Amrein & Berliner, 2003), it could be stated that both kinds of tests are defined in their specific contexts, while a test seems to be consequential for one test taker, it might be of lower stakes for another one. However, in situations where taking a test is not optional for test takers, such as high school graduation examinations and end-of-year achievement tests, it is test designers’ responsibilities to develop tests of high quality.

As a result, in the researchers’ view not only has the complex test development procedure to be taken into account in the case of high-stakes testing, it is also crucial in low-stakes contexts, as far as the overall attitudes of these two groups of test takers are almost the same towards such tests. Consequently, test characteristics such as validity, reliability, scoring criteria, reporting procedure, fairness, cut scores, and test difficulty might be better to be considered in both testing situations.

Besides, good tests encourage teachers to do good things, and would reflect more closely how teachers want to teach, how they are currently teaching, and how theory says they ought to be teaching (Alderson, 1999). This could be achieved by reviewing the merits and demerits of the tests for the sake of decreasing the drawbacks and increasing the positive points. Another solution would be constructing examination agencies where good test questions could be designed, students, teachers, school administrators, and the public could be provided with regular and systematic information on students’ performance on examination, and decisions could be made on politically and professionally controversial and sensitive issues such as test coverage and fairness (Heyneman & Ransom, 1990).

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Appendix A

با مهر امتحان دانشجویان را به صورت زیر انجام دهید:

1. خوب امتحان دانشجویان به صورت زیر انجام دهید:
   
   الف. کلاسی مخاطب ب مختل مجازات دموکراتیک، د مواقف. ها مواقف
   
   2. می‌توانم خوب امتحان بدهم.
   
   الف. کلاسی مخاطب ب مختل مجازات دموکراتیک، د مواقف. ها مواقف
   
   3. نیازهای داخلی و در این امتحان کردم.
   
   الف. کلاسی مخاطب ب مختل مجازات دموکراتیک، د مواقف. ها مواقف
   
   4. سعی کردم در این امتحان، از تمام توانام استفاده کنم.
   
   الف. کلاسی مخاطب ب مختل مجازات دموکراتیک، د مواقف. ها مواقف
   
   5. در حالی پاسخ گویی به سوالات تمرکز کردم و سعی کردم خوب امتحان بدهم.
   
   الف. کلاسی مخاطب ب مختل مجازات دموکراتیک، د مواقف. ها مواقف
   
   6. می‌توانم در این امتحان بالاترین نمره را کسب می‌کنم.

الف. کلاسی مخاطب ب مختل مجازات دموکراتیک، د مواقف. ها مواقف

 Persian Translated Version of TAS
7. خودم را ترغیب کردم که در این امتحان سخت تالاش کنیم.

8. برای اینکه خوب امتحان بدهم بسیار با الگوهای بودم.

9. اینکه چطور امتحان می‌دهم اصلاً برای اهمیتی ندانست.

10. تلاش خردانی در این امتحان نکردم.

11. برایم سخت بود که در این امتحان تمرکز را حفظ کنم.

12. رفت‌های و علایق و توجه خود را نسبت به امتحان از دست می‌دادم.

13. صر حسنه امتحان بسیار کمال شد.

14. در هنگام دانستن جملات امتحانی حواس پرت می‌شد.

15. این امتحان انکاری خودبود از آنچه شخص در طول دوران تحصیل نیاز دارد.
16. امتحانات براي مشخص كردن سطح دانش افراد شيوه خوبی هستند.
الف کاملا مخالف ب مخالفم ج نظری ندارم د موافقم ه کاملا موافقم
17. امتحاناتی از این قبل باید حفظ شوند.
الف کاملا مخالف ب مخالفم ج نظری ندارم د موافقم ه کاملا موافقم
18. اعتقاد ندارم که امتحانات آنچه را که باید بسنجد، می‌سنجد.
الف کاملا مخالف ب مخالفم ج نظری ندارم د موافقم ه کاملا موافقم
19. احتمالا به انتظار افراد ثیبگیری که همیش امتحان را دادند، خوب امتحان ندارند.
الف کاملا مخالف ب مخالفم ج نظری ندارم د موافقم ه کاملا موافقم
20. من امتحان دهدن خوبی نیستم.
الف کاملا مخالف ب مخالفم ج نظری ندارم د موافقم ه کاملا موافقم
21. در حین امتحان اغلب به این فکر می کردم که چقدر با امتحان می‌دهم.
الف کاملا مخالف ب مخالفم ج نظری ندارم د موافقم ه کاملا موافقم
22. معمولا در مورد امتحان دانش‌سرای ماضیه می‌شوم.
الف کاملا مخالف ب مخالفم ج نظری ندارم د موافقم ه کاملا موافقم
23. معمولا خوب امتحان می‌دهم.
الف کاملا مخالف ب مخالفم ج نظری ندارم د موافقم ه کاملا موافقم
24. انتظار دارم در بین افرادی باشم که نمرات واقعاً خوبی کسب می‌کنند.
الف کاملا مخالف ب مخالفم ج نظری ندارم د موافقم ه کاملا موافقم
25. لنيرات امتحانى من ممعولاً تواليتى وافق هى معا معنى لمى كند.
الف. كاملاً مخالف ب. نظرى نادر و. موافق م. كاملاً موافق.
26. دادن بحنين امتحاناتى را اصلاً دوست ندارم.
الف. كاملاً مخالف ب. نظرى نادر و. موافق م. كاملاً موافق.
27. هنگام امتحان، به عواقب ری شن در امتحانه افسر می گردم.
الف. كاملاً مخالف ب. نظرى نادر و. موافق م. كاملاً موافق.
28. هنگام امتحان انقدر دستیاچه شدم که نتوانست آنجانه که می باست خوب امتحان بدهم.
الف. كاملاً مخالف ب. نظرى نادر و. موافق م. كاملاً موافق.
29. این امتحان براي من بسیار آسان بود.
الف. كاملاً مخالف ب. نظرى نادر و. موافق م. كاملاً موافق.
30. این امتحان به سهار می‌پذیرد.
الف. كاملاً مخالف ب. نظرى نادر و. موافق م. کاملاً موافق.
31. این امتحان جالب و جالب برانگیز بود.
الف. كاملاً مخالف ب. نظرى نادر و. موافق م. کاملاً موافق.
32. به دلیل سختی به احسن سوالات امتحانی، احساس دردناکی کردم.
الف. كاملاً مخالف ب. نظرى نادر و. موافق م. کاملاً موافق.
33. در هنگام امتحان خسته شدم.
الف. كاملاً مخالف ب. نظرى نادر و. موافق م. کاملاً موافق.
34. سوالات امتحان میهم و نواضح بود.
الف. کاملا مخالف ب مخالف. د مخالف د مخالف د کاملا موافق.
35. اخیرا حالم خوب نبود و همین عامل عملکرد من در امتحان را تحت تأثیر قرار داد.
الف. کاملا مخالف ب مخالف. ج نظری ندارم د مخالف د کاملا موافق.
36. در حين امتحان تماماما به ميزان زمان باقي سانده فكر مي كردم.
الف. کاملا مخالف ب مخالف. ج نظری ندارم د مخالف د کاملا موافق.
37. هنگام امتحان دادن فشار زمانی را احساس می کردم.
الف. کاملا مخالف ب مخالف. ج نظری ندارم د مvrir د کاملا موافق.
38. عملکرد من در این امتحان شناسن من را برای فارغ التحصیلی و یافتن شغل مناسب تحت تأثیر قرار دارد.
الف. کاملا مخالف ب مخالف. ج نظری ندارم د موارد د کاملا موافق.
39. نمرات این امتحان احتمالا یا بیشتر را تحت تأثیر قرار خواهد داد.
الف. کاملا مخالف ب مخالف. ج نظری ندارم د موارد د کاملا موافق.
40. نمرات این امتحان در تصمیماتی که در آینده در مورد من گرفته می شود، مورد استفاده قرار
خواهد گرفت.
الف. کاملا مخالف ب مخالف. ج نظری ندارم د موارد د کاملا موافق.
41. زمان تقیبی زیادی را صرف آمادگی برای این امتحان کردم.
الف. کاملا مخالف ب مخالف. ج نظری ندارم د موارد د کاملا موافق.
42. خودم را برای این امتحان بسیار آماده کردم.
الف، کاملاً مطابق ب مطالب و حرفه‌ای ندارم. د. موافقم. و. کاملاً موافقم.
با تشکر از همکاری شما.