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Evaluation of Preparatory Classes (CPGE) Final Written Examinations According to Bloom's Taxonomy

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Abstract

Moroccan students at all levels are required to sit for standardized exams every academic year. Being summative rather than formative, these exams serve certain educational purposes: evaluate students' linguistic and/ or cognitive competencies. Students in preparatory classes (henceforth CPGE) are no exception; they are required to sit for a national exam every year before they can join any school of engineering or business. Because developing students' critical thinking abilities is a prerequisite in the CPGE guidelines, the written national exams are supposedly designed to assess students' critical thinking skills. The present study aims to evaluate CPGE national exams; that is, to examine the extent to which these exams assess students' critical thinking according to Bloom's taxonomy. Accordingly, this paper adopts a mixed-method approach to analyze and evaluate all CPGE exams since 2012. The study revealed that teachers have controversial views about the objective of national exams; it also showed that all the exams' questions do not equally assess students' different levels of critical thinking skills. This pushed teachers to suggest some measures to improve CPGE national exams.

1. INTRODUCTION

In education, assessment has always been associated with teaching and learning, they are at the heart of the educational experience. The importance of assessment is very significant, as Jabbarifar (2009) mentions "it provides feedback on the effectiveness of instruction and gives students a measure of their progress." (p. 2). Thus, the basic role of assessment in education is to test the efficacy of teaching and measure students' learning.

A national examination, as one of the different forms of assessment, is part and parcel of the educational process. For Mikre (2011) assessment is "a process for obtaining information in curriculum operation in order to make decisions about student learning, curriculum and programs, and on education policy matters" (p.102). Usually, national examinations take place at the end of the school year; they are forms of summative assessment.

National examinations, as Mikre (2011) claims, are part of a process that serves certain pedagogical and administrative purposes. In the same context, Jabbarifar (2009) states that assessment generally serves the following objectives:

1) Measuring improvement over time.
2) Motivating students to study.
3) Evaluating the teaching methods.
4) Ranking the students' capabilities in relation to the whole group evaluation.

The above objectives, at the same time, can be considered to be the guidelines for effective assessment so as to contribute to the development of the teaching and learning processes.

2. EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT

According to Jabbarifar (2009) assessment of students' learning improvement is one of the objectives of exams. To measure students' learning improvement, exams should address effective questions. In fact, exams should be linked to the instructional objectives and content of the course. The instructional objectives provide the theoretical framework and references to any exam; they direct the activities and questions of the exam. However, the types of questions students were asked in exams play a key role in effective assessment. Sadker (2003) sets a number of purposes for the exam questions which are: "assessing student knowledge", "probing student thought process" and "stimulating critical thinking" (cited in Demir & Eryaman, 2012, p. 54). These questions have a priority in exams according to Sadker (2003). Besides the above-stated purposes, exam questions should also be in line with the instructional objectives and content of the course.

3. CPGE NATIONAL EXAMINATION

In Classes Preparatoires aux Grande Ecoles, preparatory classes (henceforth CPGE) students in both streams science and economics are required to sit for an annual exam. The role of CPGE, according to the first article of the ministerial decree of 2004, is to prepare the students to join high schools of engineering and economics. Accordingly, CPGE students in both streams sit for the Concours National Commun or National Common Examination (henceforth CNC) and Concours Nationale D'Admission aux Ecoles de Management or National Examination for Admission to Management Schools (henceforth CNAEM); the first exam is for science and engineering students, the second one is for students of economics.

The general aim of CPGE national exams is to assess and evaluate students, then, select and rank those who manage to pass both the written and oral national exams. Ghaicha (2016) claims that "one of the purposes of educational assessment is to make decisions about students among which there is selection and classifying" (p. 215). Accordingly, CPGE national exam is both a way to assess what students have studied during the two years of preparatory classes and rank students based on their results; and the students with high ranking have more chances to join the schools of their choice.

4. ASSESSMENT IN THE ELT CPGE GUIDELINES

English language teaching (henceforth ELT) CPGE guidelines are the official theoretical and pedagogical references in English language teaching in CPGE classes. These guidelines link the objectives and aims of the course to the national policies and theoretical references concerning national education. They explain the methods and approaches to be adopted in English language classes in CPGE classes. They also give teachers details about micro and macro skills that teachers should teach and the skills the students need to learn.

CPGE ELT guidelines concentrate solely on formative assessment. This is implicitly stated at the outset of the assessment section in the guidelines, "in CPGE classes in particular, students should be tested on a regular basis" because of "various washback benefits it [formative assessment] offers for both students and teachers"(p. 13).

In-class tests CPGE students take over the two years serve certain purposes. According to the guidelines, the written tests are concrete platforms for teachers to identify and diagnose any problems and difficulties students may have because "assessment practices can be used to enhance crtical thinking among language learners" (Mandic, 2020, p. 204). On the other hand, since the students are prepared for the national exam, in-class tests should not only comply with the national examination format but also echo and reflect what the students have been taught.

5. BLOOM'S TAXONOMY OF CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

One of the objectives stated in the ELT CPGE guidelines is to develop and improve students' critical thinking and problem-solving. By the end of the two-year study in CPGE classes, CPGE students are required to acquire different skills like reflection, investigation, reasoning, organization, and initiative; these skills are necessary, according to the guidelines, to help students have access to the job market. Accordingly, Bloom's taxonomy (1956) is adopted by ELR CPGE guidelines designers to improve and develop students' critical thinking; and CPGE teachers are required to include it in their course design.

Bloom's taxonomy (1956) is categorized into six cognitive levels. These levels are ordered from simple to complex as the following: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. They range from concrete to abstract. knowledge, comprehension, application are considered low order thinking skills, but analysis, synthesis and evaluation are considered high order thinking or meta-cognitive skills.

Because of the crucial role of critical thinking in CPGE classes, the hypothesis which underlies this study is that written CPGE national exams assess students' critical thinking skills according to Bloom's taxonomy. Therefore, this study aims

1. To investigate the CPGE teachers' perspectives of the objective(s) of the CPGE national exams, whether they assess students' critical thinking or not.
2. To examine the extent to which the exam questions in CPGE national exams assess the students' critical thinking skills according to Bloom's taxonomy.
3. To investigate some of the repercussions of an inefficient (if there is any) assessment of the students' critical thinking.
4. To elicit some suggestions to better improve these exams.

This study tries to answer the following research questions:

1- To what extent do national exams assess the students' Bloom's cognitive skills?
2- What are the differences between CNC and CNAEM exams?
3- What are the possible backwash of the written CPGE national exams on the teaching and learning process?
4- What are the teachers' recommendations and future insights to improve the CPGE national exams?

6. RESEARCH DESIGN

The present study tries to explore the extent to which CPGE national exams assess the students' critical thinking skills. The following research utilizes a mixed-method, both quantitative and qualitative tools are used to cross-check and complement the obtained data, and to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings.

This study deploys content analysis to study exam questions based on Bloom's taxonomy. The analysis focuses on the verbs used in each question to see what critical thinking skill each question tries to assess. The verbs then are quantified in order to study their distribution according to Bloom's cognitive taxonomy.

A number of CPGE teachers were interviewed to crosscheck the findings of the study and get more insights about the exams questions and get some suggestions to improve the national exams.

The interviewed teachers are from different CPGE centers teaching one or both streams namely engineering and economics. Before the interview, the researcher contacted 7 teachers to get their approval to take part in the study; all the teachers accepted except one. The number of the interviewed teachers is 6 teachers from Casablanca, Kenetra, Rabat, and Meknes.

The study focuses on the CPGE written national examinations of the last nine years from 2012 to 2020. The study analyzes both CNC and CNAEM. The first exam is meant for students of the engineering and science stream, and the second is for students of economics.

All the written exam questions are classified and analyzed according to Bloom's taxonomy. As Table 1 below shows, the total number of the analyzed exam questions per year is 76; this includes 52 questions in CNC exams and 24 in CNAEM exams. The verbs in each national exam were classified into six skills based on Bloom's taxonomy, namely knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation.

Table1: *Number of questions per CPGE exam*

Years	CNC	CNAEM
2012	10	2
2013	8	2
2014	7	4
2015	4	1
2016	5	2
2017	5	4
2018	5	2
2019	5	3
2020	3	4
Total	**52**	**24**

After the classification of all the CPGE exam questions, the collected data is processed via SPSS to calculate the frequencies and percentages of the verbs that correspond to each thinking skill.

There are two limitations to the study. There were no female teachers among the interviewed teachers. This is due to the difficulty to reach female teachers to get their approval to participate in the study. Moreover, the gender of the participants is not a variable in this study. The other limitation concerns the inclusion of the CPGE students' views on the CPGE examinations. This study included CPGE teachers' views on the final CPGE exams.

7. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

7. 1. CPGE National Exams' Aim

The CPGE exams are crucial in preparatory classes, especially for teachers and students. However, the absence of a clear idea about the aims of the CPGE national exams may have negative impacts on the teaching and learning process. The qualitative analysis of the teachers' testimonies has yielded different results.

The first category of the interviewed teachers revealed that critical thinking skills assessment is the objective CPGE national written exam. M. W., a CPGE teacher from CPGE Rabat center stated, "the purpose of the CPGE national exam is to test to what extent students master critical thinking skills, and how well they can make use of these skills." According to this teacher, the mastery of critical thinking skills is the main objective of CPGE national exams. The students are supposed to apply what they have learned and acquired during the two-year exposure to critical thinking-based activities. Likewise, M. M., a CPGE teacher from Casablanca, confirmed the fact that the objective of CPGE written exams is to "test students' mastery of critical thinking." The CNC or CNAEM exams should be a context for the students to show that they have "become thought producers rather than thought consumers." (M. Kh., from CPGE Moulay Ismail, Meknes)

However, some of the interviewed teachers have a different view about the objective of CPGE national exams. They believe that the ultimate objective of CPGE exams is not to assess the students' mastery of critical thinking but to rank them according to their grades. Y. EL A., from CPGE Kenetra center, for instance, claimed that the major objective of the CPGE national exam is, in addition to evaluate students' learning, "grade their performance with the aim of ranking them according to their marks". The interviewee's response revealed another element in the objectives of CPGE national exams, which is the administrative side; the written exam is a tool to grade and rank students based on their final grades. H. R., a CPGE teacher from Casablanca CPGE center, made it clear that the objective of CPGE national exams is "to prepare students to get to higher schools such as engineering institutes." The teacher's testimony shows that the objective of grading and ranking students is to help students get into higher schools of engineering and business.

Though the teachers' testimonies seem contradictory, they highlight the two main aims of CPGE national exams, namely educational and administrative purposes. The first category of the interviewed teachers holds the view that the assessment of the students' critical thinking is the objective of CPGE final written exams. In fact, this view echoes one of the objectives stated in the ELT guidelines; as stated in the ELT CPGE guidelines, CPGE teachers need to improve students' critical thinking. However, these interviewed teachers did not make any reference to the assessment of the students' language proficiency because, according to CPGE guidelines, one of the objectives of preparatory classes is to improve the students' communicative and linguistic competencies through the four skills: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

The second category of the interviewed teachers thinks that CPGE exams serve institutional and administrative purposes. This category of interviewed teachers revealed another aim of CPGE exams, which is grading students and ranking them according to their results. Actually, after the assessment of the students' linguistic and thinking skills, the students are ranked based on their grades; the students who manage to be well-ranked will have more chances to join high schools of engineering and business of their choice.

The analysis of the interviews showed that the CPGE teachers of English do not have a clear view of the objectives of the CPGE written exams. This will certainly impact the teachers' performance both in terms of course designing and teaching.

7. 2. Assessment of Critical Thinking Skills in CPGE National Exams

As it has been stated earlier, assessment of the students' critical thinking is central in the CPGE exams. The analysis of the teachers' views and the CPGE exams yielded important results about the extent to which critical thinking skills are assessed in the CPGE exams.

7. 2. 1. Teachers' Views

The analysis of the teachers' views showed disagreement among CPGE teachers on whether the CPGE exams do fully assess the students' critical thinking skills. Two of the interviewed teachers believe that CPGE exams do really assess the students' critical thinking skills. M. W., from CPGE Rabat center, argues that CPGE national exams do really assess the students' critical thinking skills because, according to him, "all exam questions feature critical thinking skills such as commenting, summarizing, explaining, argumentation, persuasion, synthesizing, translating, etc". For this interviewee, CPGE exams do assess the students' critical thinking because there is a presence of critical thinking skills in all national exams like commenting, summarizing, explaining, argumentation, persuasion, synthesizing, translating, etc. By the same token, M. M., CPGE teacher from Casablanca CPGE center, believed that the written exam "gauges the students' critical thinking abilities." This teacher confirms that the CPGE exams fully assess and gauge the students' critical thinking skills.

Some of the interviewees, nonetheless, stated that there is a moderate assessment of critical thinking skills. The national exams do not completely and thoroughly assess students' critical thinking. M. Kh., CPGE teacher from Meknes CPGE center, said that national exams do assess critical thinking skills in students but in a moderate way; he believes the reason is that "some questions do not really target the students' critical reactions to the reading material. Instead, they instigate the students to paraphrase the reading content. For example, answer the question in your own words". According to this teacher, the type of questions in the exam does not try to trigger the students to react to questions in a creative way, but to simply paraphrase and re-write some of the reading content. Y. El A., a CPGE teacher from Kenetra CPGE center, mentioned that national exams do not assess students' critical thinking to a larger extent. CPGE students, according to this teacher, are required to answer questions related to reading comprehension and writing; that is the four skills. However, he argued that "some writing tasks can gauge the students' critical thinking". Likewise, H. R., a CPGE teacher from Casablanca CPGE center, stated that CPGE national exams do not "purposefully address critical thinking skills in students". That is to say, there is no systematic assessment of the students' critical thinking; for this interviewee, CPGE exams do not target specific critical thinking skills.

The teachers' controversial testimonies on the assessment of critical thinking skills in the CPGE exams can be accounted for by the absence of any academic and professional training. Pre-service and in-service trainings are essential to the teacher's professional development and in-class practice. According to Belghiti et. al (2017), the majority of CPGE teachers have never had any professional training (pre-service and in-service) on critical thinking teaching. This can affect the teachers' views on critical thinking teaching and assessment. In addition, Belghiti et al (2017) showed that the majority of CPGE teachers had never been exposed to critical thinking at the university level. Consequently, the teachers' views on critical thinking teaching and assessment can be affected by the absence of any academic or professional exposure.

7. 2. 2. Differences between CNC and CNAEM Exams

All CPGE students, regardless of their streams, study the same themes in the English course; they are also all concerned with the ELT CPGE guidelines. However, the analysis of the number of questions in both CNC and CNAEM exams of the last six years has revealed certain discrepancies.

After classifying the verbs in all exam questions according to Bloom's cognitive taxonomy, we can notice in Table2 below clear differences between the two exams in the total number of questions as well as the number of verbs in each critical thinking skill.

Table2: *Distribution of Bloom's Taxonomy-based questions in CNC and CNAEM exams*

Exams	knowledge	Comprehension	Application	analysis	synthesis	evaluation	Total
CNC	5	45	1	12	11	9	83
CNAEM	2	22	0	4	4	4	36

The total number of targeted cognitive skills in all CNC exam questions from 2012 to 2020 is 83 questions compared to 36 in all CNAEM exams. The number of assessed cognitive skills in the CNAEM exams is less than half of the number of the assessed cognitive skills in the CNC exams. Thus, the number of the targeted skills in both exams reveals a clear difference between the two exams.

Additionally, the analysis of the questions aiming to assess specific cognitive skills yields important results; there are differences in the distribution of the exam questions according to Bloom's taxonomy of critical thinking skills. It is noticeable in Table 2 that there is a high presence of comprehension skills in both exams more than any other thinking skills. The number of questions related to comprehension skill in the CNC is 45 questions, while for CNAEM exams, we notice that there are 22 questions related to comprehension. However, the table shows the presence of 1 question related to the skill of application in the CNC exams while there are no such questions in the CNAEM exams.

The statistical analysis of the distribution of targeted thinking skills in questions has confirmed the discrepancies between the two exams. Figure 1 below shows the presence of each thinking skill in both the CNC and the CNAEM exams.

Figure1: *Distribution of questions in CNC and CNAEM exams*

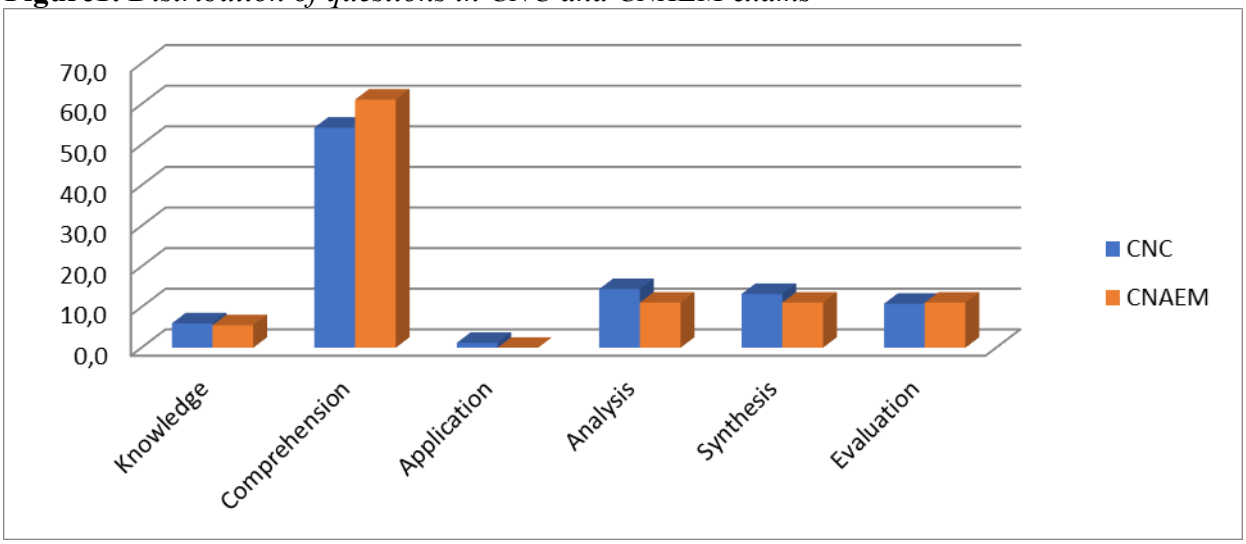

Figure1 above shows that the majority of questions in both the CNC and CNAEM exams are related to comprehension. 61.1% of the questions of the CNAEM exams aim to assess CPGE students' ability to exhibit their comprehension skills. Likewise, 54.2 % of the exam questions in the CNC exams target the same cognitive skill. In the second position, we find high order thinking skills (analysis, synthesis and evaluation) with 11.1%; similarly, in the CNC exams, we find high order thinking skills in the second position with 14.5 %, 13.3% and 10.8% respectively. Questions targeting knowledge skills come in the third position (6% in the CNC exams and 5.6% in the CNAEM exams). However, the figures above reveal a complete absence of questions related to application skills, especially in the CNAEM exams; only 1.2% of the questions in the CNC exams tried to assess the students' application skills.

Thus, it appears that the majority of CPGE exams target specific cognitive skills rather than others.

Figure 2 below clearly confirms the unequal distribution of the exam questions related to each thinking skill. By analyzing the questions in the CNC and CNAEM exams combined, we notice that 62.5% of exam questions address comprehension skills. However, questions in both exams almost do not address application skills.

Figure 2: *Distribution of CNC and CNAEM CT Skills Questions Combined*

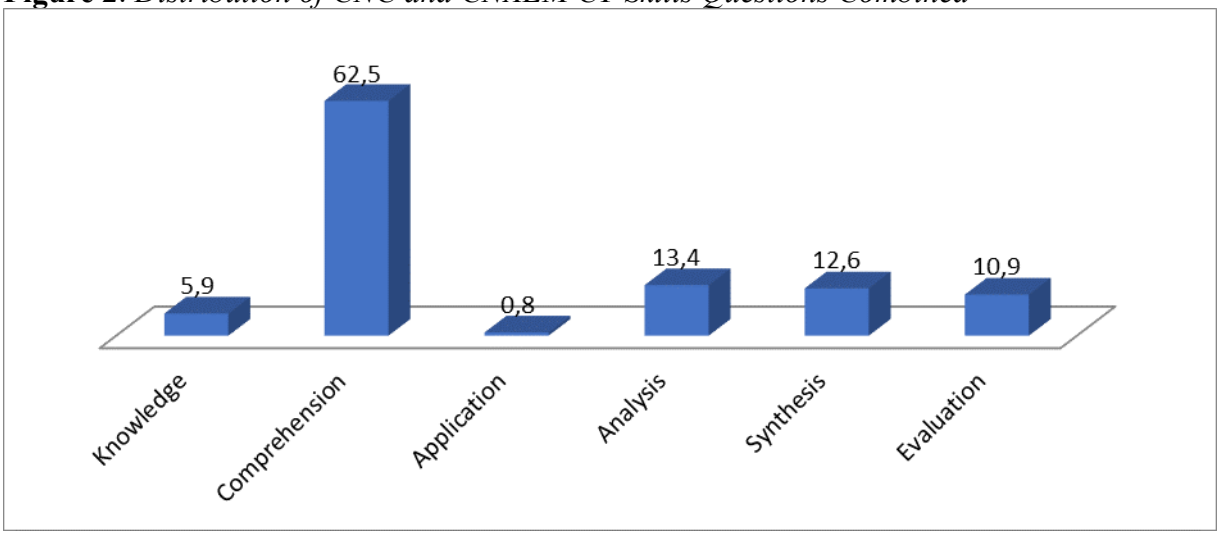

Figure 3 below shows in details the existing discrepancies between the CNC and the CNAEM exam questions in assessing students' cognitive skills.

Figure 3: *Annual Distribution of CT Skills in CNC and CNAEM Exams*

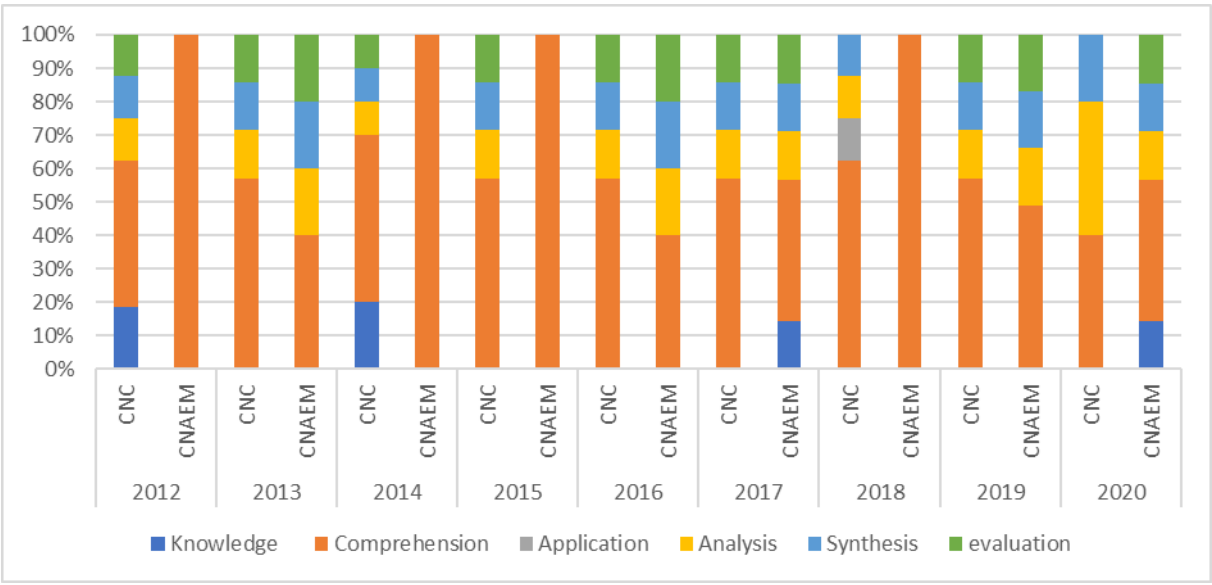

Figure 3 reveals that some of the CPGE exams failed to assess the students' high thinking skills. The CNAEM exams of 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2018 address solely students' comprehension skills, while other skills are not targeted. Moreover, the application skills are almost absent in all the exams except the 2018 CNC exam. Evaluation skills are completely untargeted by all CPGE exams.

The statistical analysis of the CNC and CNAEM exams shows that the CPGE exam questions have failed to assess all the thinking skills of the CPGE students. Actually, the majority of the exam questions tend to assess more low-order thinking skills like comprehension at the expense of high-order thinking skills. This goes against the ELT guidelines which insist on addressing all the thinking skills starting from knowledge skills to evaluation skills. Furthermore, there is another dissimilarity between the two exams; Figure 3 reveals that CNC exams, more than CNAEM exams, aim to assess students' high thinking skills. The inconsistency in the assessment of students' all thinking skills, and the focus on low thinking skills will certainly have some impact on the teaching and learning processes in the CPGE classes.

7. 3. Impacts of the CPGE Exams on the Teaching and Learning Process

The absence of any details about the national exam in the CPGE ELT guidelines plus the inconsistency in the targeted thinking skills can impact the teaching and learning process. This leads to psychological and educational consequences for both students and teachers as is revealed in the analysis of the teachers' testimonies.

The analysis of the interviewed teachers' testimonies has revealed a link between the national exams' content and the teaching and learning process. For all the interviewed teachers, the effect of the final exam is inevitable; for example, M. W., a CPGE teacher from Omar El Khayam, Rabat, confirmed the interconnectedness between exams and the teaching and learning processes in class, he said that "any exam should have backwash effects." Likewise, Y. El A., a male teacher from Mohamed VI CPGE center, Kenetra, confirmed the close relationship between national exams and teaching methodology, he said: "CPGE exams and the contents and methodology of teaching are intertwined." For this teacher, the teaching methodology is affected by the exams' content, because teachers can model their lessons in a way to fit the national exam.

However, qualitative analysis of the teachers' testimonies revealed that the inconsistency in the exam questions targeting the students' cognitive skills have negative impacts on both students and teachers. As far as students are concerned, M. M., from Casablanca CPGE center, argued that the final exam puts a lot of pressure on the students; he stated that "the national examination is the students' mission in the first place, […] students double their efforts and persevere to ultimately succeed on the day of the exam". The interviewed teacher drew attention to the psychological impact of the CPGE final exams on students; they become alert, and they concentrate all their effort to be well-prepared and ready for the exams instead of trying to acquire and improve their thinking skills. Hence, to pass the final exam becomes an obsession for every CPGE student rather than to improve their thinking skills.

Focusing on low-order thinking skills like comprehension can have certain effects on the students' learning strategies. Unlike high order thinking skills, low order thinking skills do not require much intellectual effort from students. By having questions targeting just low order skills, students become passive learners and rely on rot learning and memorization rather than reflective learning (Paul, 1992; Haynes et al, 2016; Yassin, Razak, & Maasum, 2019); they would just reproduce the same piece of knowledge rather than evaluate it. This eventually will produce passive engineers and managers who will be unable to create and innovate, and thus, will affect their chances of securing a place in the job market.

Concerning the teachers, the same teacher stated that "teachers do their best to meet the national guidelines and, also find suitable material that best suits the thematic program". Moreover, S. R., a teacher from Omar Ibn El Khattab CPGE center, Meknes stated that: "here in CPGE, we prepare students for CNC exam we give importance to writing skills, essay writing, commentary, summary." According to these interviewed teachers, in-class teaching

practices in CPGE classes are exam-oriented; the final exam becomes a target and priority for CPGE teachers. The teachers' main mission is to prepare the students for the final exam. Consequently, the teachers, during the two years in the CPGE classes, concentrate only on the major elements that the students will be tested on in the exams like commentary, summary, translation, etc.

Finally, the inconsistency in the number and types of questions targeting critical thinking skills affect the validity and reliability of the exams. The number and the length of the exam affect the reliability of the exam; Justin and John (1996), for instance, argue that "an adequate number of items usually produce high reliability since they usually provide a representative sample of the behavior being measured". This is not seen in the CPGE national exams' questions which are neither consistent nor representative of the supposedly targeted skills. Moreover, as Table1above shows, the number of questions in some exams is not compatible with the number of the targeted thinking skills, which means that the CPGE exams' questions do not test what they are intended to test: students' low and high critical thinking skills. Thus, the length of the CPGE exams has a negative effect on the validity and reliability of the national exam.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

For a better and effective assessment of the student's critical thinking skills in CPGE national exams, the interviewed teachers suggested the following recommendations. Since there is an absence of some high levels of critical thinking skills, it is highly recommended by the interviewed teachers to target more higher-order thinking skills such as synthesis and evaluation and assess the learning for transfer rather than retention. As future managers and engineers, having high-order thinking skills is highly wanted and appreciated. Therefore, the questions should target higher-order thinking skills so as to help the students develop a sense of curiosity, creativity and innovation; by so doing, the students would be producers of thoughts rather than consumers. Moreover, the interviewed teachers stressed the fact that exam designers should seek the opinions of the teaching staff in the field so as to fix certain gaps in these exams. Finally, to give more value to the subject and urge students to give it more importance, it is suggested that the coefficient of the subject should be raised. Thus, these measures and suggestions would improve the effectiveness, quality and value of CPGE national exams.

9. CONCLUSION

It seems that the findings have shown that CPGE teachers do not have a clear idea about the aim of the CPGE final exams and whether these exams do really and fully assess the students' critical thinking skills. The content analysis of the CPGE exams has revealed that the exam questions do not equally target all the thinking skills. As it has been highlighted by the interviewees, the discrepancies in the exam questions and the skills targeted have negative impacts on both the teachers and students; the in-class teaching and learning strategies are affected by the irregularities and inconsistencies in the exam questions. However, having well-structured exams that assess all the students' critical thinking skills, and include CPGE teachers' suggestions and recommendations may improve the effectiveness of the CPGE national exams and eventually have positive effects on the teaching and learning process. Finally, by focusing solely on teachers for data may affect the findings of this study; therefore, more data need to be collected which include both exam designer and CPGE students.

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