

## EFL Students' Test Preparation Practices in the Nepalese context

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### Abstract

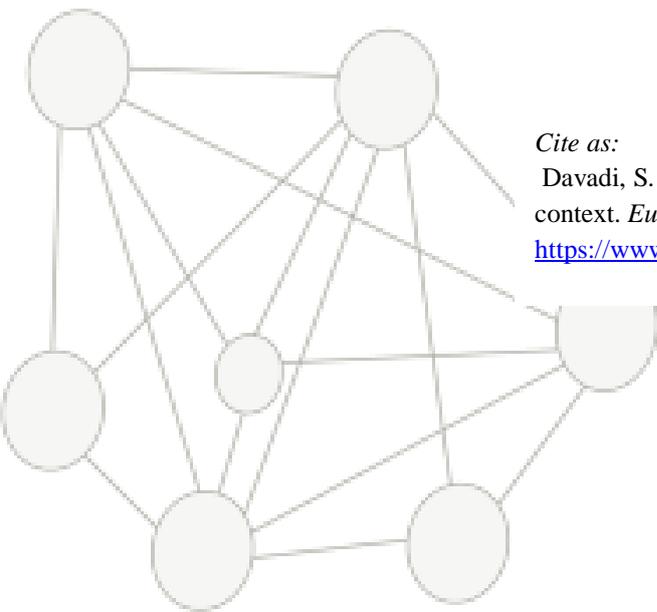
Test preparation is often seen as a potential factor influencing students' performances beyond their ability on the construct measured by language tests. It is assumed that the higher the stakes of a test, the more likely that students are engaged in the test preparation as students are under pressure to raise test scores. The literature on language testing indicates that test impacts on classroom learning (and teaching) has been widely explored. However, little research has explored English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' out-of-class test preparation practices though they spend more time outside formal classes. The research reported in this paper explored this area in the context of Nepal. The major focus of the current study was on the Secondary School Examination (SEE) English test- a nationwide large-scale standardised test conducted at the end of 10-year school education in Nepal. The stakes associated with the SEE are extremely high as its grades determine which course a candidate can study in higher education and the test is used as a basic qualification for most jobs in Nepal. Thus, success in this examination widens students' prospects for students' self-development.

**Keywords:** EFL Student, Test Preparation

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Test preparation is often seen as a potential factor influencing students' performances beyond their ability on the construct measured by language tests. It is assumed that the higher the stakes of a test, the more likely that students are engaged in the test preparation as students are under pressure to raise test scores (Kim, 2016). The literature on language testing indicates that test impacts on classroom learning (and teaching) has been widely explored (e.g., Allen, 2016; Zhengdong, 2009). However, little research has explored English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' out-of-class test preparation practices though they spend more time outside formal classes. The research reported in this paper explored this area in the context of Nepal.

The major focus of the current study was on the Secondary School Examination (SEE) English test- a nationwide large-scale standardised test conducted at the end of 10-year school education in Nepal (Dawadi & Shrestha, 2018). The stakes associated with the SEE are extremely high as its grades determine which course a candidate can study in higher education and the test is used as a basic qualification for most jobs in Nepal (Bhattra, 2014; Dawadi, 2020). Thus, success in this examination widens students' prospects for students' self-development (Dawadi, 2018, 2020; Shrestha, 2018).

Regarding students' performances on a high-stakes test such as the SEE English test, Haladyna, et al. (1991) rightly point out that in order to judge the value of a test end or outcome, we "should understand the nature of the processes or means that led to that end. It is not just that means are appraised in terms of the ends they lead to, but ends are appraised in terms of the means that produce them" (p. 6). Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the SEE students' out-of-class test preparation practices in Nepal. The paper aims to contribute to the growing body of research on out-of-class test preparation practices.

### 1.1 Test Preparation

Test preparation usually refers to activities undertaken by students to review and practise the contents or skills sampled by a test (Knoch et al., 2020). It usually aims to increase test scores by focusing on test-taking skills rather than improving students' language competence (Fulcher, 2010). Thus, it is often seen as a potential factor influencing students' performances beyond their ability on the construct measured by language tests (Clause, et al., 2001).

Test preparation can be seen as a component of the wider issues of test washback, which generally refers to the effects of a language test on teaching and learning the language. In this article, washback specifically refers to the influence of the SEE English test on students' out-of-class learning practices which they would not necessarily otherwise follow (Alderson & Wall, 1993).

It is assumed that the higher the stakes of a test, the more likely that students are engaged in the test preparation (Zhengdong, 2009). Since students in a high-stakes test context are usually under pressure to raise their test scores, the pressure encourages them to engage in test preparation activities. Indeed, test preparation has been so popular in this contemporary society that almost all high-stakes test-takers go through some sort of preparation.

## 1.2 Research on Language Test Preparation

A substantial body of research has explored EFL students' test preparation practices. For instance, Xie (2013) reported that the Chinese EFL learners used more test preparation management (TPM) strategies (such as familiarizing themselves with the test contents, practising with previous tests and taking mock tests) than language development (LD) strategies (such as reading extensively in English, using English to communicate, listening to authentic English broadcasts, and reading for pleasure) when they were preparing for the College English Test (CET-4) (a high-stakes English test in China). However, Shih (2007) found that the test-takers of the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) in Taiwan, besides taking preparatory courses at cram schools, tended to use various LD strategies such as practising speaking with classmates, reading previous textbooks out loud and listening to a local radio station and repeating what has been broadcast. Kim (2016) also reported that the Korean students preparing for the tests of English-speaking proficiency, besides taking test preparation classes at specialised test preparation institutions, learned in groups and independently using a textbook or online coaching programme. However, Greek students preparing for the First Certificate in English (FCE) exam in Loumbourdi's (2014) study were found mostly using traditional techniques, such as cramming, memorising and drilling.

Previous research on test preparation further indicates that students obsessively focus on passing exams or on the test contents (Onaiba, 2013; Takagi, 2010; Xie, 2013; Zhan & Andrews, 2014; Zhan & Wan, 2016). Resnick and Schantz (2017) argue that students in the USA focus only on test contents and they take practice tests that closely match test contents. Furthermore, Takagi (2010) found that the majority of students preparing for the University Entrance Exams in Japan focused only on the skills assessed by the exams. Similarly, having explored the impacts of the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) in China, Xiao, et al. (2011) reported that the development of language skills was overshadowed by the high-stakes nature of the examination. Furthermore, Qi (2007) found that the Chinese EFL learners were not motivated to develop their ability to write communicatively in real-life situations though it was hoped that the NMET would motivate them to write for communicative purposes. The students tended to focus only on those aspects of writing that they believed would support them in gaining better scores. Furthermore, it has been reported that if a particular content or skill is not assessed, the content is likely to be ignored by test-takers (e.g., Akpinar & Cakildere, 2013; Pan & Newfields, 2011; Shih 2007; Xie, 2015).

Test preparation has also been explored in relation to ethics and validity. Popham (1997) puts forward a two-pronged system for evaluating test-preparation practices, which includes both educational defensibility (the educational practices that raise both test scores and domain scores) and professional ethics (i.e., fundamental morality and/or teachers' educational obligations to perform ethical behavior for their students). There is a need to frame test-preparation practices in terms of their likely effects on score validity (Lai & Waltman, 2008) and to ensure that test preparation practices are ethical. For instance, Lai and Waltman (2008) argue that practising with the same test questions/contents is unethical but teaching test-taking skills is ethical. Therefore, Knoch et al. (2020, p.552), rightly point out:

Test preparation can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, without any preparation one may have doubts about the accuracy of the test score as a measure of ability, as a candidate's performance may be unfairly jeopardized by features of the test method with which they are unfamiliar. On the other hand, the wrong kind of preparation, or too narrowly focused preparation, will either be counterproductive in the sense that it does nothing to improve language ability or might artificially boost the candidate's score for reasons of test wiseness unconnected with the ability the test is targeting.

Despite their useful findings, previous studies limit "test preparation to classroom activities or test taking skills and strategies which are taught in classroom settings rather than to explore test preparation as a context where test-takers actually prepare for a test" (Kim, 2016, p.12). To the best of the current researcher's knowledge, only four studies, (i.e., Allen, 2016; Huhta, et al., 2006; Zhan & Andrews, 2014; Zhan & Wan, 2014) have explored the area (i.e., out-of-class test preparation). Allen's (2016) exploration on Japanese students' out of class test preparation strategies indicated that the students adopted a test-focused approach, that is, they focused primarily on test related materials and tasks found in the test. Similarly, Huhta et al. explored the impacts of the Finnish school-leaving examination on students' after school test preparation practices. They found that test preparation was influenced by students' expectation for success or failure, their perceptions of hard work and their expectations for credit and blame. The other two studies investigated out-of-class learning practices of the CET-4 test-takers in China. Zhan and Andrews's (2014) study mainly focused on 'what' and 'how' students learnt outside the classrooms. The findings suggested that the test impacted more on what they learnt than on how they learnt for the test. Similarly, Zhan and Wan's (2014) study suggested that students' out-of-class learning practices "appeared to be divided into two distinct periods, namely the regular learning period and the examination preparation period" (p.828). However, none of the studies (excluding Allen, 2016) have their major focus on test preparation strategies.

Thus, the testing literature does not seem to be comprehensive in terms of students' out-of-class test preparation practices although most students spend more time outside school. It should be noted that classroom is not the only place where real learning takes place; a lot of learning happens outside classroom. Ignorance of out-of-class learning practices can have detrimental effects on pedagogical practices at schools. Furthermore, most of the previous studies are confined to the test preparation phase (e.g., Akpınar, et al. 2013; Xiao et al., 2011; Xie, 2013; 2015). Consequently, very little is known about how a test affects students over a period of an academic year. Therefore, this study was designed to fill the gaps in research. It was basically guided by the question 'What kind of learning strategies do EFL learners use outside their classroom to prepare themselves for a high-stakes test?'

### 1.3 Theoretical Framework to the Study

The idea that tests have effects on students' learning is relatively new. Alderson and Wall (1993) first unpacked the concept of washback mechanism and put forward 15 washback hypotheses on the nature of washback (see Alderson and wall, 1993 for detail). The washback

model basically claims that a test affects learning (and teaching) the language. However, Alderson and Wall's claim that there is a linear relationship between tests and teaching or learning has been challenged.

Developing a basic model of washback, Hughes (1993) introduced a concept of the trichotomy and argued for distinguishing between participants, processes and products. In his framework, participants refer to the people such as students, teachers, parents, administrators, material developers and publishers who are directly or indirectly affected by the nature of a test. Thus, Hughes did not limit washback to (teachers and) learners. The term 'processes' refers to any actions that the participants or students take for the sake of learning the language whereas the term 'product' refers to learning achievement. Hughes further discusses that the trichotomy into participants, process and product allows us to develop a basic model of washback. At first, the nature of a test may affect students' perceptions and attitudes towards their learning tasks. "These perceptions and attitudes in turn may affect what the participants do in carrying out their work (process), including practising the kind of items that are to be found in the test, which will affect the learning outcomes, the product of the work" (Hughes, 1993, p. 2). Furthermore, Shih (2007) puts forward a washback model which indicates that test washback is linked to the social and educational contexts in which the test is administered.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 Participants

The participants in the study included secondary level students (N=226) studying at Grade 10 in rural public schools in Nepal. The students had been learning English as a foreign language for 10 years and their age ranged between 14 and 16 years old. All of them were Nepali native speakers and they were studying at Grade 10 when we started to collect qualitative data for this study.

As the vast majority of students live in rural parts in Nepal and study in public schools, the data for this study was collected only from public school students in rural parts of Nepal. The participants for the survey were selected by using a random sampling procedure from eight public schools which were purposively selected for the study.

### 2.2 The Test

The SEE English test, being a summative test, mainly aims to record the achievement of the SEE candidates in the SEE English curriculum. The total mark of the SEE English test is 100 and it is divided into two: speaking and writing. The speaking test (that includes listening as well) is internally conducted by schools whereas the writing test (which includes reading as well) is externally controlled by the National Exam Board- a constituent organisation of the Ministry of Education (Ministry of Education, 2014). The writing test includes tasks such as true/false items, matching, gap filling and one-word answer questions (for testing reading skills) and tasks for developing a skeleton into a story, writing essays, describing events, describing pictures, describing situations and writing stories, whereas the speaking test

includes the tasks telling stories, describing pictures/charts/ diagram, multiple choice, gap filling, ordering and tick the questions (Ministry of Education, 2014).

### **2.3 Research Ethics**

The code of practice for research at The Open University, England and British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (2018) were followed to maintain the ethics in this study. Both children and their parents were given a full account of the project and we requested permission from children's' parents for them to take part in the project. Children themselves were also directly asked whether they wanted to take part in this study. Both parents and students were informed that participation was voluntary, and that all data would be treated as confidential and anonymised promptly.

### **2.4 Data Collection**

This study featured a mixed-methods approach comprising survey, diary entries and interviews. Since a convergent parallel mixed-method design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018) was employed, both data sets were concurrently collected (but independently) and the findings were combined during the data interpretation phase only.

In order to collect quantitative data, a questionnaire survey was carried out with 226 students who had recently gone through the test. All the questionnaires were distributed face to face considering the fact that most of the students did not have access to the internet. Among the students, six were asked to record oral diaries once a week intermittently for two months: first during the usual classes (i.e. in the fifth month of their academic year) and second during the test preparation (i.e. around two months before the test). Furthermore, all of them (along with their parents) were interviewed twice: around six weeks before the SEE and two months after the SEE results publication. However, it should be noted that the data presented in this paper is part of a large research project that explored various other issues related to the impact of the SEE English test in the Nepalese context.

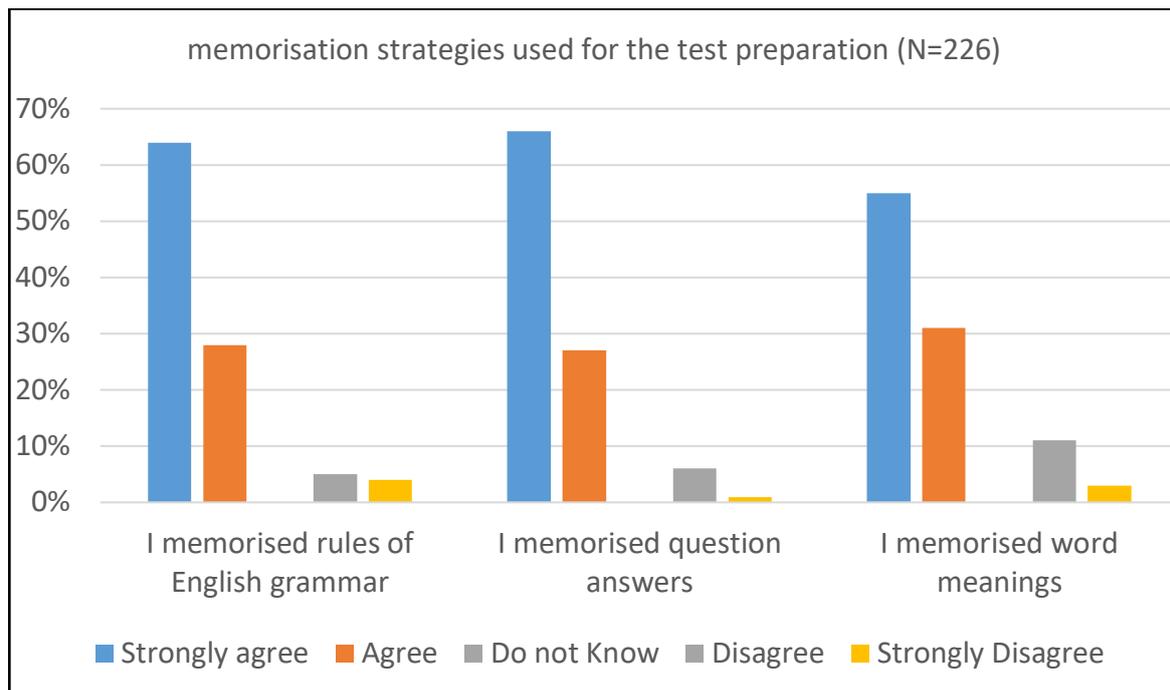
### **2.5 Data Analysis**

In order to analyse qualitative data (i.e., open-ended questionnaire items, interviews and oral diaries), all the interviews and diaries were transcribed and translated and a thematic analysis approach, an established method of qualitative data analysis, was employed. The software NVivo 11 was used to systematically organise the data and the themes emerged through the analysis. As thematic analysis is an iterative process (Braun and Clarke, 2006), several procedures (such as familiarizing with the data, generating initial codes, searching for main themes and reviewing themes) were followed. The quantitative data gathered through the close-ended questionnaire was analysed using SPSS and descriptive statistics were calculated.

## **3. FINDINGS**

### **Memorisation**

Students' responses to the survey revealed that, as shown in Figure 1, the majority of the students used all the three memorisation strategies included in the questionnaire.

**Figure1:** Memorisation strategies used for the SEE English test preparation

The quantitative results were supported by qualitative findings; memorisation was one of the most frequently occurring sub-themes in the qualitative data analysis. Students' diaries indicated that they spent a significant amount of time memorising answers. Two of the diary students reported that they started memorising answers right from the beginning of the academic year. Almost all the first eight diaries of each student indicated that the students memorised question answers:

*I have already memorised some answers. I have decided to memorise as many answers as possible for the test (S5).*

words,

*I memorise the meanings of all the difficult words. I have already memorised so many words from the SEE preparation book (S3).*

and the rules of English grammar:

*I have also memorised so many vocabularies and grammar rules. I am very much hopeful that I will be able to get good scores on the test (S1).*

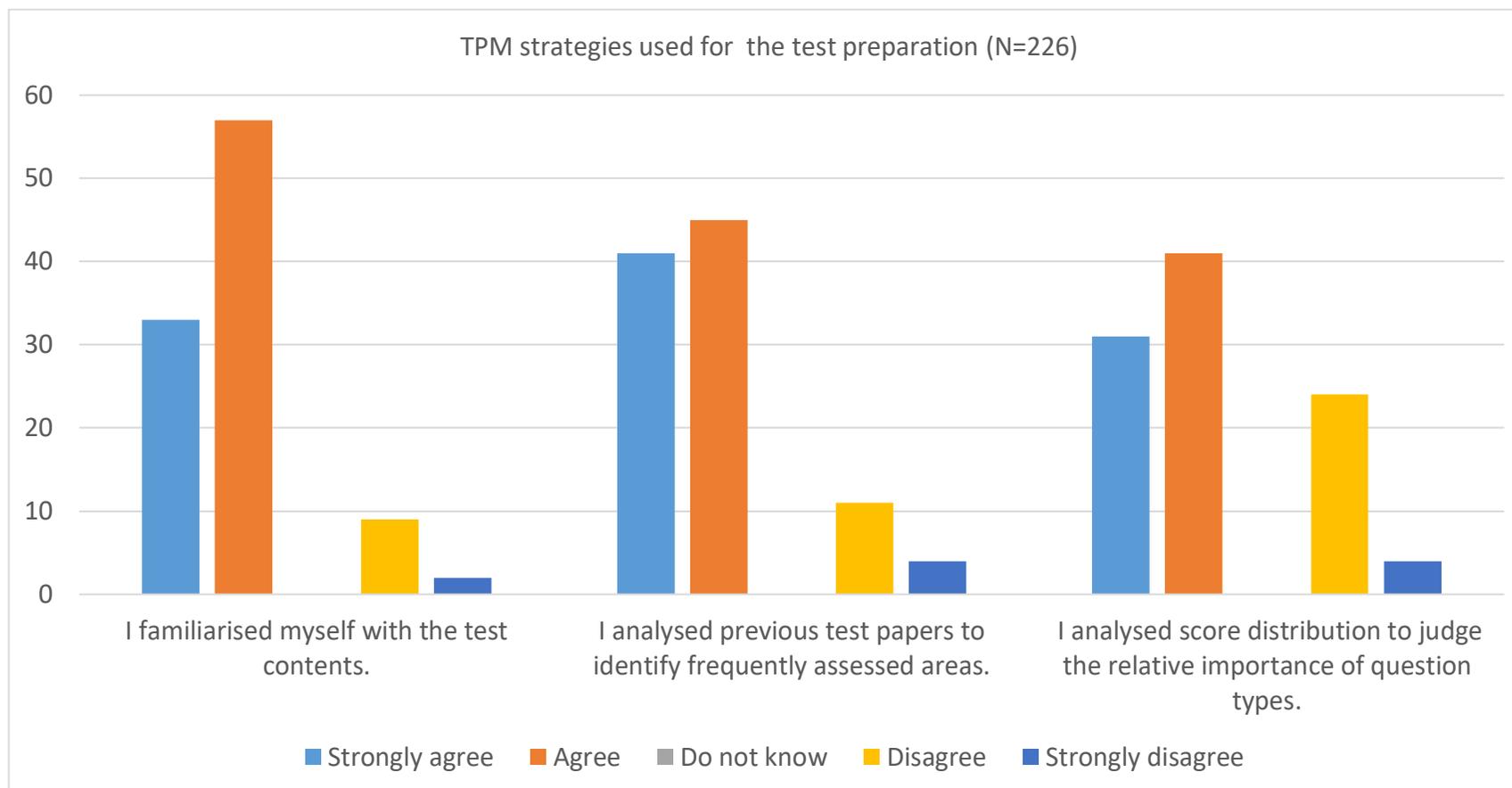
The study revealed extreme cases of rote memorisation. All the diary students memorised texts-the SEE oriented texts. 'Texts' here refers to essays, stories, news reports, and pie-chart and bar-diagram description including dialogues. They memorised all those texts by rote, often mechanically and repetitively:

*I have memorised so many things such as short question answers, long question answers, essays, letters and dialogues [...]. I have also memorised some structures for dialogue writing and bar diagram descriptions (S2).*

Indeed, diaries further indicated students' belief that memorisation helps them to develop their language skills: "*We need to memorise grammar rules to be able to use English correctly*" (S1). There were also some indications that they were encouraged by their teachers and parents to memorise answers: "*On Friday, our teacher had written answers on the blackboard and asked us to copy the answers and memorise them*" (S2), "*My mother suggests me to memorise answers*" (S3).

### **Test preparation management (TPM) strategy**

Students' responses to the questionnaire indicate that TPM strategies were the second most frequent strategies.

**Figure 2:** TPM strategies used for the test preparation

Similar findings emerged through the qualitative data. All the diary students were found practising three of the TPM strategies: Familiarising themselves with the test contents,

*I have gone through previous test papers, Ten Sets and my textbook. I have seen that long answer questions are mainly from unit three, six and twelve (S3).*

analysing previous test papers to identify frequently assessed areas or questions,

*I have even collected some SEE test papers to find out what sort of questions are repeatedly asked in the examination (S2).*

and learning test-taking strategies:

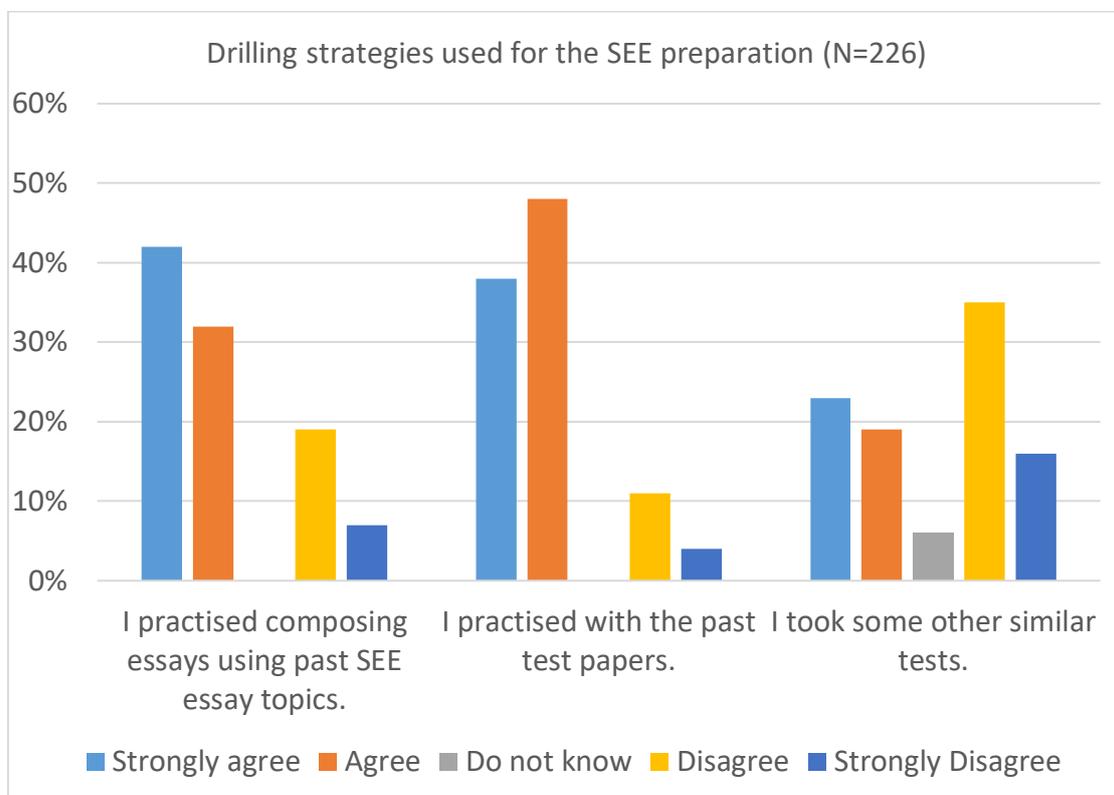
*I have learnt how to manage time during the test. I have a plan like to give around 10 minutes for short questions and 20 minutes for long questions (S2).*

Two of the diary students further reported that they analysed the weight of each test component to judge the relative importance of the question types. This means, students analysed past papers to find out the weightage of each kind of items included in the test.

### Drilling

The findings of this study indicate that students hugely used drilling strategies. Figure 3 suggests that the majority of students practised with the past test papers (38% strongly agreed, 48% agreed) and composed essays using the SEE essay topics (42% strongly agreed, 48% agreed). Nearly half of the surveyed students (42%) took some other similar tests as well.

**Figure 3:** Drilling strategies used for the SEE English test preparation



The quantitative results were supported by qualitative findings. All the diary students practised with old SEE questions: *“I have done most of the exercises from my SEE practice book and made notes of those questions”* (S6).

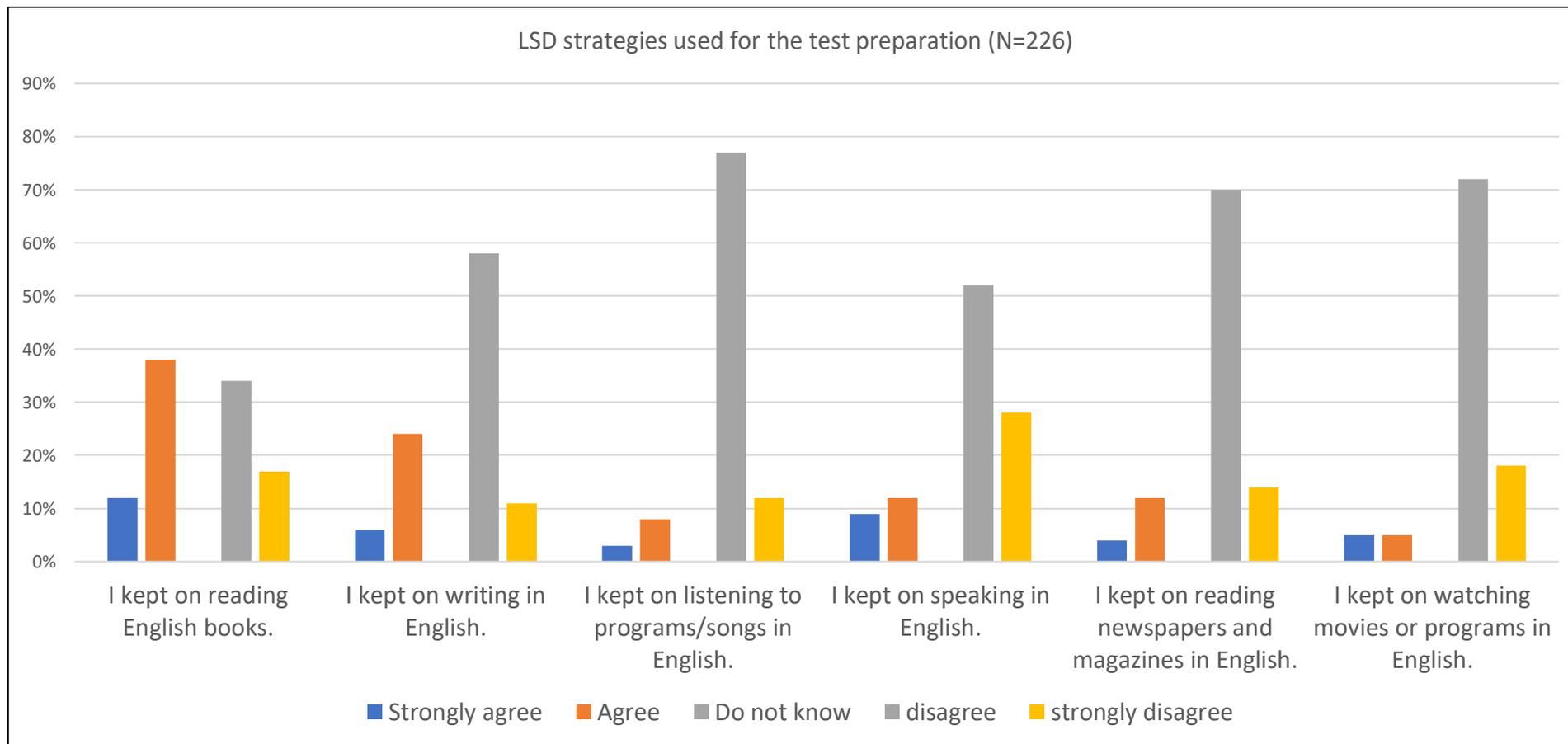
Interestingly, the majority of surveyed students reported that they practised composing essays using the past SEE papers but the diary students(except S6) were found rarely composing essays using the past papers (or any other topics). Instead, they were found memorising the SEE essay topics:

*I did not try to write any essay on my own. Actually, I was not able to write long answers on my own. So, I would just memorise essays that were asked in the past SEE and then write them on my notebook* (S3).

Similarly, there was a contradiction between the quantitative and qualitative findings in terms of taking mock tests. According to the survey, just about one third of students seemed to take mock tests but all the diary students reported that they took such tests for a number of times in their schools when the test grew closer: *“Our teacher would ask us to take so many tests”* (S1); *“I took a couple of similar tests”* (S3). This finding might indicate that the surveyed students may have misunderstood what the question in the survey referred to.

### **Language skills development (LSD) strategies**

Students' responses summarised in Figure 4 indicate that most students rarely used the LSD strategies included in the questionnaire, excluding the two strategies: reading English books and writing in English.

**Figure 4: LSD strategies used for the test preparation**

The qualitative findings related to LSD strategies are mixed. For instance, four of the students limited their reading to the SEE contents. They read only Grade 10 English textbook, the SEE preparation book, Ten Sets (i.e. the collection of SEE papers), Essay Composition Book and Pocket Dictionary (the SEE vocabulary). However, the first phase diaries recorded by two students indicate that they were frequently reading English books: *“On Monday, I read some essays and stories [...] I am really interested in reading story books in English”* (S6); *“I read the story books that I have at home. Yesterday, I also went to our library and borrowed two story books”* (S1). Nevertheless, these two students' reading was also limited to the SEE related books when the test grew closer.

Four of students were found frequently listening to songs and watching movies in English during the first phase of the diary recording (i.e., around five months before the test) but they performed the activities less frequently when the exam grew closer. Similarly, the first phase diaries indicated that four of the students tended to watch movies in English at the beginning of their academic year, but they rarely watched movies in English when the exam grew closer.

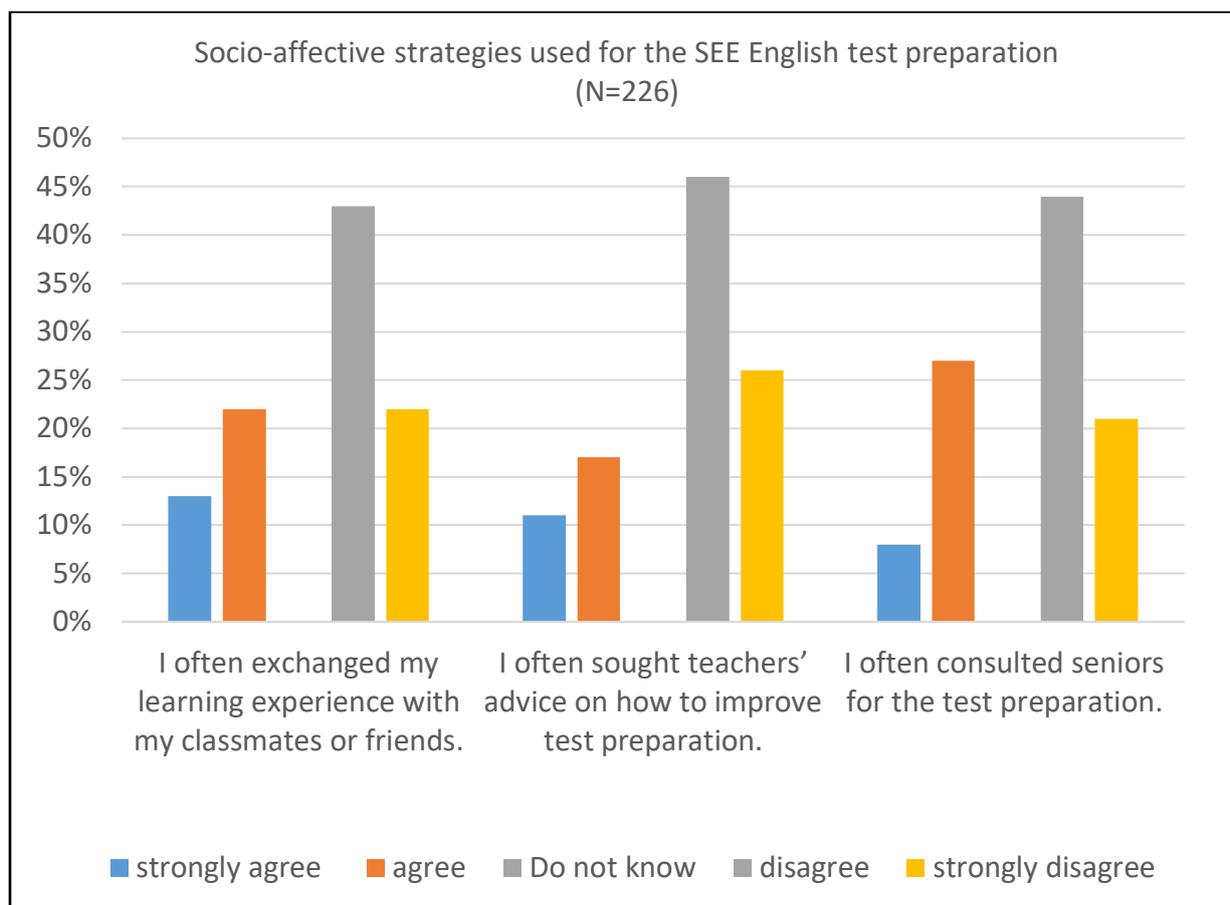
As indicated by the quantitative results, the diary students did not practise speaking skills much. Only three students (high achieving students) were found practising English, though not very frequently, during the first phase of diary recording but they nearly stopped their practice when the exam grew closer.

It was also found that none of the students (except S1) was found watching and/or listening to English programmes. Moreover, three of the diary students (S2, S3, S5) did not read any newspapers and magazines: *“I did not read any newspapers in English. We do not find them in our village”* (S2). However, the remaining three students reported occasionally reading newspapers and magazines in English. Their reading would also be mostly limited to vacancy announcements. They also reported: *“Vacancy announcement related question has been frequently asked in the test”* (S1). This finding suggests that their motivation to read newspapers in English is to practise with SEE related questions, rather than developing their language skills.

The findings further indicated that students were afraid of losing face in front of others: *“I just feel shy to speak English. I get scared to speak English as I think that I make so many mistakes”* (S3). Indeed, students' diaries indicated that they had little opportunity to practise listening and speaking that led them to ignore the practice of those skills: *“We do not do any listening and speaking activities in our class”* (S3).

### ***Socio-Affective Strategies***

The findings of the study indicate that the majority of surveyed students did not use socio-affective strategies when they were preparing for the SEE English test (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5:** Socio-affective strategies used for the SEE English test preparation

The quantitative results were not well supported by qualitative findings. All the diary students (except S1) were found consulting their seniors: *"I sometimes talk to seniors about the test preparation. They tell me what type of questions are asked on the test"* (S2). Moreover, they tended to take help from their neighbours and relatives: *"I went to my neighbour's home to learn English as he is also an English teacher in another school"* (S1); *"I sometimes take help from one of my relatives to learn English"* (S3). However, the students in general did not exchange their learning experiences with their classmates or friends: *"I never shared my experience of learning English with my friends. I never asked questions to my friends as they were also not good at English"* (S3). Furthermore, none of them sought for teachers' advice on how to improve test scores.

### Additional Strategies

Besides those five major strategies, the students' diaries and interviews indicated that they tended to use several other strategies. Among those strategies, doing homework, revising or rereading the contents learnt at school, regularly and taking notes were the most common strategies: *"I did home work every day and also revised some lessons"* (S2); *"I have been making notes of the answers which are important for the SEE"* (S6). The findings further indicated that students spend more time in learning English at home than at school *"I think, I spend much more time in learning English at home than at school"* (S1).

Moreover, the survey indicated that almost all the students (95%) took coaching classes run by their school teachers and 9% students took some private tuition classes as well. In the Nepalese

context, private tuition classes usually enrol very few students (ideally five to six students per class) whereas coaching classes are usually large. The quantitative results were supported by qualitative findings. All the six diary students had taken coaching classes in their own school for a minimum of eight months. Two of the students even stayed in the school accommodation for three months just before the SEE.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are consistent with the findings of previous test impact studies (e.g., Loumbourdi, 2014; Xie, 2013, 2015) that learners use memorisation as one of the main techniques to prepare themselves for an EFL test. Huang (2010) also reported that memorisation was the most popular strategy among the Chinese EFL learners; 80% of the CET students memorised answers for its preparation.

There could be various factors that motivated students to memorise answers for the SEE English test. First, rote memorisation might be closely associated with the Nepalese educational culture. Very similar to the Chinese culture as reported in Huang (2010), memorisation seems to be the most popular strategy in Nepal for learning English. Indeed, memorisation has been used as a predominant strategy for teaching and learning English in the Nepalese schools (Bhattraï, 2014). Having explored the impact of the SEE English test on teachers' classroom practices and on students' motivation to learn English, Dawadi (2018) points out, "during class observation it was seen that most of the teachers were using teacher-centred methods and encouraging their students to recite answers" (P.147).

Second, the finding that they spent a significant amount of time memorizing answer suggests that many questions in the SEE are repeated every year as most questions are designed from a small textbook. Third, the type of the questions included in the test might have motivated students to use memorisation as the chief strategy to prepare themselves for the test. As Davies (2015) reported, there are very few higher-order questions in the SEE English test requiring students to interpret unseen texts and use higher-order thinking skills. The SEE questions do not give an opportunity to students to articulate their creativity (Bista, 2011; Mathema, & Bista, 2006). Fourth, as indicated by Shih's (2007) washback model, students' learning practices seem to be affected by social factors. For instance, Nepalese parents usually influence their children's learning practices as the test performances is associated with social prestige (Dawadi, 2020, 2021).

However, students' memorisation was not merely mechanical and superficial; in some cases, it was very comprehensive too. By memorising answers and rewriting the texts out or retelling them, students were not only preparing for the test but also practising their ability to write and speak; this could have some positive effects of the test preparation on learning (Huang, 2010).

There could be two tentative explanations for the findings that TPM was the second most frequent strategy. First, students seemed to be influenced by their teachers. There were several indications that teachers tended to make efforts to train their students on how to take the test. As Giri (2011) rightly points out, schools and teachers in Nepal are mainly concerned with training their students with exam tactics and equipping students with well-prepared answers in order to improve their test scores. Second, questions asked in the SEE unfailingly get repeated year after year (Budhathoki et

al., 2014). This might have encouraged them to analyse the test contents and the previous test papers.

The students in this study frequently used drilling strategies as well. This finding echoes the finding reported by Xie (2013) that the Chinese EFL test-takers heavily use drilling as a key strategy for CET preparation. Gosa (2004) also reported that the Romanian secondary students felt a strong need to practise exam related tasks and contents. Indeed, practising with past papers and mock tests are the two most common test preparation strategies in several countries (Huang, 2010). In the Nepalese context, high use of drilling strategies at home by the SEE students seems to be a result of their classroom practices. Bashyal (2018), for example, contends that drilling is one of the most frequent activities in the Nepalese ELT classrooms, particularly at the secondary level. It is also worth pointing out that Nepalese students' practices with the test questions or the test contents might raise some ethical issues.

Indeed, the collections of past and mock test are probably the two most popular and most profitable SEE materials sold in the Nepalese market. There are also some unofficial collections available in the Nepalese market. The lucrative practice of publishing the SEE preparation materials is an indicative example of the social and economic impact of the SEE on students. Looking at this practice from another angle, test preparation practice in Nepal has been largely affected by publishing industries.

Overall, students did not use LSD strategies much, and interestingly, the use of those strategies decreased as the test got closer. This indicates that when pressure builds up, 'softer' learning strategies are abandoned for 'hard core' test drilling. In other words, when tests get closer, students give up precisely those strategies that would promote more flexible and individual ways of learning. The findings are consistent with Xie's (2013) finding that the Chinese EFL learners did not use LSD strategies much when preparing for the CET. Communicating with classmates, parents and teachers were among the least frequent activities the SEE students did. These findings suggest that students give top priority to improve test scores, but not to develop their language skills. Thus, the findings provide further evidence to Dawadi's (2018) claim that most of the SEE teachers focus on the exam rather than on skill development.

However, students' learning strategies seem to be affected by students' socioeconomic aspects. For instance, watching TV and reading newspapers and magazines in English were the least frequent activities used by students but one of the main reasons behind this reality was that most students did not have good access to such things. Furthermore, students' hesitation to seek suggestions from their teachers on how to increase their test score could be a result of academic hierarchy and a cultural practice in Nepal. Teachers are always in a higher rank than their students in the Nepalese honorific hierarchy and most are simply interested in maintaining a formal relationship with their students. As Bhattra (2014) points out, a significant gap between students and teachers always remains in Nepal, in terms of collaboration and interaction; teachers might feel that they lose the admiration and respect of students by being friendly with their students. Budhathoki et al. (2014) further argue that students in the Nepalese classroom study in a subdued manner and they perceive their teachers to be superior. This means that there is a lack of informal bonding between teachers and their students. Consequently, students are reluctant to talk to their teachers as they may feel apprehensive about confronting their teachers.

Interestingly, the study indicated that students took help even from their relatives and neighbours. None of the previous studies have reported the use of such strategies by students for learning English. One of the tentative explanations for this finding would be that, contrary to many other countries, Nepalese societies have a good bonding among the people living in communities. As they are living in good harmony, it seems quite common for them to take or give help among the people.

The findings that students' over dependence on additional tuition classes in Nepal and spending a huge amount of time in learning English at home seem to be associated with the high stakes associated with the test. Indeed, Nepalese students consider the SEE to be everything in their life, "failure in the exam equating to failure and meaninglessness in life" (Bhattraai, 2014, p.70).

To reiterate, the findings of the study are consistent with the washback model introduced by Shih (2007) that test washback is linked to the social and educational contexts in which the test is administered. In other words, social and educational factors existed in the Nepalese society seem to affect the nature of the test washback.

### **5. Limitations of the study**

The study revealed interesting findings regarding the SEE preparation practices. However, the study has four major limitations. Firstly, the sample size was limited to 226 students; so, findings cannot be generalized from such a small sample size. The second limitation of this study is from a methodological point of view. This study was limited to the data collected from students, but it would have benefited from additional classroom data collected through teacher interviews. It would have been helpful to know what the teachers' perspectives were, particularly about their teaching techniques and content focus in the classroom. However, this shortcoming was, to some extent, compensated for through students' oral diaries.

The third limitation is pertinent to the frequency of diary recordings. As the students were asked to record their diaries once a week only, they might not have accurately recalled what they learnt in English or how they learnt English during the week. Additionally, the students were asked to record their diaries only for two months. Therefore, this study lacks information about students' learning practices in the rest of the months during that academic year. However, there is no reason to suggest that the findings of this study are not generalizable to other students, particularly public-school students, across the country.

### **6. Conclusion**

The study has unpacked the test washback issues in the Nepalese context. The findings of the study indicate that the SEE English test has a huge impact on students' learning. This means, this study provides further evidence to Alderson and Wall's (1993) washback hypothesis that the tests that have important consequences will have washback. There are several indications that the SEE influences what and how learners learn, and the degree and depth of learning. For instance, the SEE students used memorisation as one of the major strategies for learning English and they memorised mostly the test contents which further indicates that their learning was limited.

Besides providing some evidence to the current washback theories, the study contributes to test preparation or washback studies theoretically. It has unpacked students' out-of-class learning

practices suggesting that students spend a huge amount of time and/or make a great effort for learning English outside their classroom. The study has some unique findings such as students taking help of their relatives and neighbours to learn English and spending more time in learning English at home than at school. Thus, the study points out the need to rethink our current washback theories which generally do not consider the role of students' out-of-class learning practices.

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