

An Evaluation of the Algerian EFL Baccalaureate Exam under the Cognitive Domains of Bloom's Taxonomy

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Abstract:

The Algerian English foreign language (EFL) baccalaureate is a high stake exam that assesses both students' learning and their critical thinking skills. Thus, devising appropriate and effective exam questions may be a problematic issue for tests designers. Under the requirements of the current Algerian English curriculum, the exam questions must cover the lower and higher-order thinking skills of Bloom's taxonomy. On this basis, this research paper seeks to investigate the effectiveness of the EFL baccalaureate exam papers, and aims to answer the research question: 'To what extent does the Algerian EFL Baccalaureate exam paper cover the lower and higher-order thinking skills of Bloom's taxonomy?' This research is a descriptive content analysis; the researcher analyzed the exam questions of the Algerian EFL Baccalaureate under the cognitive domains of Bloom's taxonomy. This study is significant as it helps tests' designers to design practical EFL exams that develop students' thinking skills and language competencies. The findings of this study revealed that the EFL baccalaureate exam does not establish the students' higher-order thinking skills and does not assess their communicative abilities. Accordingly, some recommendations are suggested to hopefully help test designers to improve the quality of the EFL Baccalaureate questions.

Keywords: Algerian EFL baccalaureate exam, Bloom's taxonomy, cognitive domains, practical exam

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Introduction

The Algerian schools adopted English as a second foreign language. It is stated in the national curriculum that English teaching aims to help students harmonize into modernity by fully participating in the linguistic society which uses this language for all types of interaction (3AS curriculum, 2011, p. 04). Accordingly, the 3AS students must leave the secondary school with a specific exit profile as follows: “In a communicative situation and based on oral or written support, the student must produce a written message of about twenty lines in a chosen type of written speech (descriptive, narrative, argumentative, expository, injunctive) correctly and legibly.” (3AS curriculum, 2011, p06).

In other words, the students must develop their language competencies such as interaction, interpretation, and production to be communicatively competent. To test the students’ exit profile, 3AS students fit for a high-stake exam, which is the baccalaureate exam, to check if they reached the final integration objectives. The baccalaureate exam is a challenging test that must measure the students’ target goals and critical thinking skills. The type of EFL exam paper is a traditional way of assessing students’ mastery of what they studied chosen by most test designers. Koksal, D. and Ulum, Ö.G, mention that “An exam paper is a traditional way of assessment– being the common choice of teachers evaluating the learners’ degree of success in a particular lesson in which the necessary cognitive ability of students is determined through the exam scores.” (2018, p2). The baccalaureate exam determines the students’ cognitive abilities through their scores and grades. Therefore, a good EFL exam must assess the students’ lower and higher-order critical thinking skills, which are a set to confirm the learners’ understanding level (Haris & Omar, 2015); and to accommodate the students’ diverse abilities (John, Harland, Reid & Bartlett, 2009). Thus, it is necessary to promote a practical EFL baccalaureate exam to assess the students’ learning and critical thinking skills. With all that had been stated, several issues related to the Algerian EFL Baccalaureate exam keep ongoing unexplored and unresolved and make the literary gap. Since the quality of educational programs is strongly related to the evaluation’s quality, especially for the 3AS students, the EFL Baccalaureate exam plays a critical role in learning for acting as a university entrance exam. Each question of the EFL exam is significant because it tests the learners’ cognitive levels (Omar et al., 2012). Previous research revealed that difficult questions could be unfamiliar to the learners, as they require answering through reasoning, decision-making, analysis, synthesis, and critical thinking (Zoller & Tsaparlis, 1997; Ordem, 2016). In the same regard, adapting exam papers to assess both higher and lower-order thinking skills allows considering the nature of the relationship between low and high-level questions. Questions that assess lower-order cognitive skills improve the acquisition of the knowledge and pave the way to acquire higher-order cognitive skills; while, questions that assess higher-order cognitive skills are practical assessment tools for enhancing the students’ critical thinking skills (Frehat & Smadi, 2014). Thus, composing an appropriate EFL exam paper in the Algerian context may be problematic for tests’ designers because they must take into consideration: the measurement of students’ critical thinking skills and language communicative abilities, the scoring and time consuming of each question is an intricate part in constructing an exam paper.

This study examines to what extent the Algerian EFL Baccalaureate exam paper covers the cognitive domains of Bloom's taxonomy. It aims to answer the research question 'To what extent does the Algerian EFL Baccalaureate exam paper cover the lower and higher-order thinking skills of Bloom's taxonomy?' and tries to confirm the hypothesis claiming that 'The Algerian EFL Baccalaureate exam does little in advancing the students' higher-order thinking skills.'

This study is significant because it aims to investigate the extent of the cognitive domains of Bloom's taxonomy in the Algerian EFL baccalaureate exam paper to suggest ways that may help the test designers to construct effective, appropriate and creative EFL baccalaureate exam questions that measure the students both learning and critical thinking skills under Bloom's taxonomy. The results and suggestions of this research can help test designers to construct a useful baccalaureate exam that is worth measuring the students' language competencies and critical thinking skills.

Literature Review

Bloom's Taxonomy

Bloom et al, (1956)'s book introduced a framework that is known as "Bloom's Taxonomy." It provides a way to categorize educational goals. It is useful for teachers, instructors, courses, tests, and curricula designers; it is also helpful to plan lessons and construct assessment tools. Bloom's taxonomy makes sure that Students have clear, measurable instructional objectives, indicating disparities between what teachers teach and what they assess. Bloom's taxonomy plays the role of a guide for learning development and assessment construction by providing a concrete consciousness to balance between teaching and testing, which educationalists consider essential in the development of the students' cognition (Kastberg, 2003). The American heritage dictionary (2016, p 1528) defines cognition or understanding as "the mental process of knowing, including aspects such as awareness, perception, reasoning, and judgment, or that which comes to be known, as through perception, reasoning, or intuition; knowledge."

Bloom's taxonomy is composed of six levels that are called the cognitive domains; which are divided into two parts: three lower-order thinking skills and three higher-order thinking skills (Eber & Parker, 2007). They are ordered as illustrated in figure1:

Knowledge: refers to the act of recalling necessary information in long-term memory.

Comprehension: refers to the students' understanding of what they learned.

Application: refers to the use of what students learned.

Analysis: refers to the breaking down the knowledge into parts and understanding how these parts are related.

Synthesis: refers to building structures or patterns from different elements.

Evaluation: refers to the highest level of thinking and the most demanding mental process.

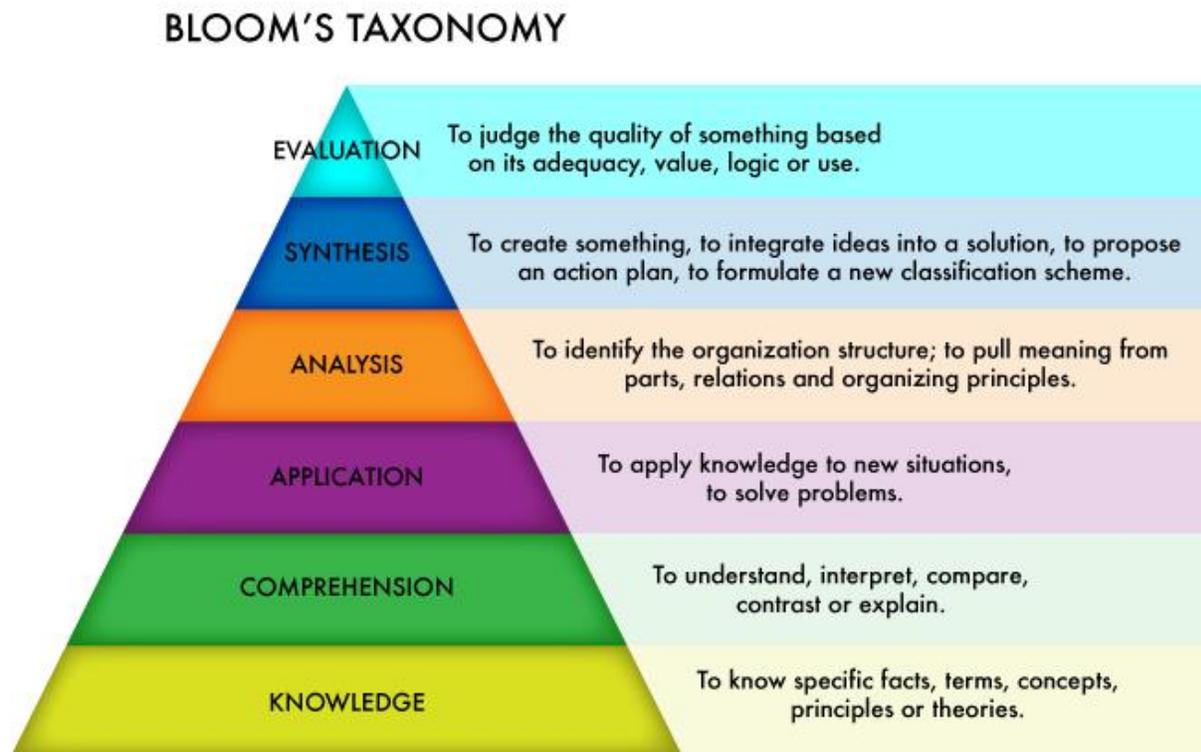


Figure 1. Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (Bloom et al. 1956)

The Algerian EFL Baccalaureate exam

The baccalaureate is a high stake exam took by third year secondary school students. It takes place by the end of the academic year, and it is a university entrance exam. The EFL Baccalaureate exam consists of two parts. The first part is "Reading Comprehension," which in turn consists of two parts "Comprehension" and "Text exploration." The second part is "writing expression." It is mentioned in the Algerian "examiner guide" (National Office for Examinations and Competitions, 2019, p03), that the EFL Baccalaureate exam paper aims at evaluating the students' ability of understanding a text in connection with reading and their ability to express themselves correctly and reasonably.

EFL in Algerian Secondary Schools

Algeria adopted English as a foreign language on its educational institutions. English takes a part of the Algerian curriculum and it is taught in secondary and middle schools since independence. Both scientific and literary streams in secondary school study English as a subject along with other matters of the curriculum. English coefficient differs for both streams; also, the time devoted to study English per week is different for these streams. The

approach adopted to teach English is the “Competency Based Approach.” This research is concerned with the Analysis of the EFL Baccalaureate exam, which is taken by the students of the third year in secondary school by the end of the academic year.

Methodology

This research study is a “descriptive content analysis” design. Descriptive content analysis is defined as “content analysis are careful to identify appropriate categories and units of analysis, both of which will reflect the nature of the document being analyzed and the purpose of the research.” (Cohen et al. 2007, p 164). The researcher analyzed each question of the Algerian EFL exam paper to check which level of the cognitive domains it belongs. In other words, the study identifies the employment of Bloom’s taxonomy in constructing the EFL exam questions. The exam sample used for this research is one of the two topics of the EFL baccalaureate exam (2019, TOPIC 1) (see appendix) of foreign languages stream students. Each question of the exam papers is analyzed solely under Bloom’s taxonomy to see which thinking level it covers to answer the research problem stated before.

Data Analysis and Results

The researcher analyzed each question in the “Reading” piece and “written expression” part in the EFL baccalaureate exam paper according to the cognitive domains of Bloom’s Taxonomy to see which thinking order skill it covers. The results are as illustrated below:

Comprehension

Write the letter that corresponds to the right answer.

1. Fighting corruption should be the duty of
 - a. all partners. b. the government. c. businesses.
2. The government is responsible for dealing with ...
 - a. corrupt civil servants b. individuals who offer bribes c. both of them.
3. Eradicating corruption is
 - a. easily achievable b. hard to achieve c. prohibited
4. Preventing corruption depends primarily upon
 - a. weak auditing systems b. public mobilization c. inefficient laws

The question presented above of the EFL baccalaureate exam topics (June, 2019) is not challenging nor reliable because the students can guess the correct answers quickly. In other words, the question above does not require any effort of the mental process; students answer just through guessing. Therefore, these exam questions are missing construct validity and reliability in terms of consistency of measurement and accuracy of measurement. They do not fulfill the learning of English to be used in real-life situations or a communicative case. The typology of the “True-False” question does not exist in the 3AS textbook, which means students are faced with it the first time in their academic year. As a result, this type of activity covers the “knowledge” level of bloom’s taxonomy.

In which paragraph is it mentioned that

- a. actual benefits result from the combination of social and economic efforts?
- b. promoting ethical principles is a critical way to reduce corruption?

The question illustrated above requires the students to answer according to the text given. This question does not need a complex mental process; the students can answer just by reading and checking words in the text to find the appropriate answer. As a result, this type of question belongs to the “Knowledge” level of bloom’s taxonomy.

Answer the following questions according to the text:

- a. Why do some companies and individuals get involved in bribery?
- b. From a political point of view, who is in able to lead the fight against corruption?
- c. What measures can prevent corrosion?

The question illustrated above is a ‘WH’ question, which requires the students to construct answers themselves relying on the text. This type of activity is more reliable than the questions stated before. These questions require more mental processes; they need the students to understand the text’s meaning to write the appropriate answers. As a result, these types of tests belong to the “Comprehension” level of bloom’s taxonomy, as it demands more mental process and push students to think.

WHO or WHAT do the underlined words refer to in the text?

- a. who (§1) b. this (§4)

The question above requires the students to guess the appropriate answer from the text. Therefore, to answer this question, students do not use a complex mental process; they just need to read and understand the meaning in the text than copy the right answer. As a result, this question belongs to the “comprehension” level of bloom’s taxonomy.

Choose the correct answer. The text is...

- a. Narrative b. Descriptive c. Expository d. Argumentative

The question above requires students to guess the correct answer, which is the given text; students can find it through guessing, which is not a very demanding mental process. In other words, this type of question is not challenging. It requires the students to read, understand, and respond. This question belongs to the “Comprehension” level of bloom’s taxonomy.

Text Exploration***Find in the text words or phrases that are opposite in meaning to:***

- a. **drawbacks** (§1) ≠..... b. **legal** (§3) ≠.....

The task below requires the students to find out the synonyms and antonyms of the words in the text through understanding the meaning of the words in the text. This activity is a more reliable and more mental process demanding. Still, it should be considered that students may already know the word before and its’ synonym or antonym. Thus, this question belongs to the “knowledge” level of bloom’s taxonomy.

Complete the chart as shown in the example.

Table1. Activity from the baccalaureate exam

	<i>Verb</i>	<i>Noun</i>	<i>Adjective</i>
Example	to corrupt	corruption	corrupt
	to assume	.....	.....
	.....	.....	involved
	.....	legislation	.....

The question presented above belongs to the Second part of “Reading,” which is “Text exploration”; this question is reliable and challenging. It is about lexis and word-formation. This type of problem requires the students’ recall of knowledge because the students who can construct the appropriate answer can claim the ability of the correct item and language structure. Therefore, this type of activity covers the “knowledge” level of bloom’s taxonomy.

Combine each pair of sentences with the connectors given between brackets. Make changes where necessary.

- a. Corruption is a widespread problem. All parts of society must fight corruption. (**such that**)
- b. Governments are making efforts to eradicate corruption. It is still prevalent in our community. (**despite**)

The activity above requires the students to restate the sentences and rewrite them into one compound and complex sentences. This activity needs the students’ understanding of the clauses meaning to know how to relate them. Thus, it covers the Synthesis level as it consists of the production of a unique communication level of bloom’s taxonomy.

4. Circle or write the silent letter in each of the following words:

honesty – campaign – while – fight

The activity above requires the students to answer based on their knowledge of the given items. In other words, they need to recall the experience of terms uses to remember which letter is silent. This type of activity covers the “knowledge” level of Bloom’s Taxonomy.

Reorder the following sentences to get a coherent passage:

- a. That’s why since the dawn of human civilization.
- b. Ethics is vital to every society.
- c. Men have sought to keep human conduct in check to preserve the peace of the community.
- d. As it plays a critical role in shaping the individuals’ behaviors.

The question above requires the students to reorder the sentences to get a meaningfully coherent passage, which is for ordering. This activity type does not require any students’

knowledge, which means they are unreliable and unchallenging. These activities cover the “synthesis” level of Bloom’s taxonomy, but it seems that the students can answer quickly through guessing without using their thinking skills.

Part two: Written Expression

-Choose ONE of the following topics: (BAC, 2019, topic1)

Topic one:

You have heard that someone asked a friend of yours to give a bribe to get a job that he/she is really in need. Due to his/her difficult situation, he/she accepted this offer. Write a letter of about 80 to 100 words to convince him/her not to commit such an offense.

The following notes may help you:

Bribery is unethical – an act of dishonesty –have a guilty conscience –illegal and punishable –life to be ruined –favors corrupt people – contribution to mediocrity.

N.B. sign as Ali.

Topic two:

You are a freelance reporter interested in the phenomenon of illegal emigration. You decided to embark with illegal emigrants to experience the challenging conditions of their crossing of the Mediterranean Sea and discover the reasons behind this risky adventure. Write a web article of about 80 to 120 words to sensitize future adventurers about the dangers of illegal emigration.

In the second part of the EFL baccalaureate exam paper, the students must choose one topic, as illustrated above. One of these topics has relation to the given text, which means that students are psychologically prepared to answer this topic. This second part assesses the students’ writing performance, i.e. it is a performance assessment. This type of activity requires the students to express their ideas in correct and legible English. They must respect the structure of the composition. These activities inform the testers about the students’ ability to combine the language elements to have a coherent paragraph. These activities cover the “synthesis” level of Bloom’s Taxonomy. It also should be stated that the topics where students are given hints to follow in writing their compositions are more comfortable and less challenging.

Discussion

Even though many studies, such as (Scott, 2003; Thompson et al., 2008; Jones, Harland, Reid, & Barlett, 2009; Chang & Chung, 2009; Swart, 2010; Omar et al., 2012), have been conducted to check the classification of exam questions according to the cognitive domains of Bloom’s taxonomy, a few of them attempted to categorize the exam questions in different fields. This study reveals that among the activities within the “Reading” part of the Algerian EFL baccalaureate exam, there are “True-False” questions, multiple-choice questions, discrete-point tests, or “close-ended” questions which the testers themselves did not construct the answer. These types of tests are scored quickly and objectively. Besides,

the discrete-point activities stimulate the students to guess rather than developing their communicative abilities as they focus on the language structure and lexis. “Restricted-response items” is another type of activity found in the Algerian EFL Baccalaureate exam, requiring the students to construct short answers themselves such as “filling the gap” activities unlike close-ended tests. “Restricted-response items” type of tests are more reliable than discrete point tests. Still, there are some “Restricted-response items” in the Algerian EFL Baccalaureate exam, which lack reliability and validity.

Within the second part of the Algerian EFL Baccalaureate exam, which is “written expression,” the test is an “open-ended item”. It requires the students to write long answers to write an essay. They must communicatively express their ideas. On the other hand, the topics that guide the students to write put stress on them as they are not free to express their ideas about the subject. Most of the activities within the Algerian EFL Baccalaureate exam are practical, but they lack reliability and validity. Speaking about the reliability criterion, most of the activities are guessing actions except for the “written expression.” Coming up to the validity criterion, first, as the activities occurring in the EFL Baccalaureate exam exist already with the 3AS textbook, it can be assumed that the EFL Baccalaureate exam claims content validity. Second, there are no activities within EFL Baccalaureate exam that measure the students’ pronunciation and speaking skills, thus; the EFL Baccalaureate exam doesn’t claim face validity. Lastly, the EFL Baccalaureate exam as a whole doesn’t measure the students’ communicative abilities. Therefore, it doesn’t claim to construct validity.

Furthermore, the EFL baccalaureate exam activities belong to the “knowledge” or “comprehension” level of Bloom’s taxonomy, except the second part activity, “written expression,” which belongs to the “synthesis” level of Bloom’s taxonomy. Koksal D. and Ulum, Ö.G. (2018)’s study also revealed the exam questions lack of higher-order thinking skills; and exam papers are commonly used in the educational institutions; the study showed that the implementation of the high-order thinking skills questions enhances interaction between teachers and learners. The activities focus on the recall of information rather than stimulating students to think critically. Hence, the Algerian EFL baccalaureate exam covers the lower-order thinking skills in the hierarchy of the Cognitive domains, and does not cover the higher-order thinking skills such as “application,” “synthesis,” and “evaluation.” Additionally, the EFL Baccalaureate exam kept the same format for many years despite the educational reforms. Indeed, the EFL Baccalaureate exam 1999 has the same design as the one of 2019; what is additional in the EFL Baccalaureate exams after 2002 is the pronunciation activities. To sum up, the Algerian EFL Baccalaureate exam has its strengths and weaknesses. The EFL Baccalaureate exam contains 11 questions; 5 of them belong to the “Knowledge” level,” three questions belong to the “Comprehension” level” and three belong to the “Synthesis” level. This means that about 45% of the questions belong to the “knowledge,” approximately 27% of the questions belong to the “comprehension” and the rest belongs to the “synthesis”.

Conclusions

This paper helps teachers and tests designers to build a practical EFL Baccalaureate exam that tests the students' cognitive domains and their communicative abilities. According to the results, the EFL Baccalaureate exam shows a must to be improved by respecting the criteria of a good test, using challenging activities that stimulate students to use their higher-order thinking skills. Additionally, to claim "construct validity," the students' communicative abilities must also be tested. Communicative languages tests will, in turn, motivate them to learn English to be used in real-life situations as mentioned in the exit profile (achievement of learning objectives) in the 3AS curriculum: learners should be able to use the language both orally (listening and speaking) and in writing to express themselves. Accordingly, there is a mismatch between the EFL Baccalaureate Format and the exit profiles of each stream. Nevertheless, the two skills are neglected in the BAC. Thus, the aim is to design practical tests to measure the students' abilities, language skills, and competencies.

The EFL Baccalaureate activities should be under another format that assesses the students' critical thinking skills and "reasoning strategies." To reach these objectives, the activities should ask the students for their interpretation, in-depth understanding, reasoning, explanations and justifications. As Gray D. (1996). Mentions that challenging activities are the best for students because they enhance them to interpret, analyze, or manipulate information in response to a question rather than just recalling knowledge. The tests, that require students only guessing, must be omitted or at least minimized, and as the "open-ended" and "discrete point" questions indicate the students' weaknesses and strengths, tests' designers can keep them.

The EFL Baccalaureate exam must stress the development of the students' communicative abilities and language use in real-life situations rather than sticking to the focus of writing in the classroom context. The rationale behind designing the EFL Baccalaureate exam in this way is to fit the national curriculum objectives and the competency-based-approach to language teaching whose aim is to shape students' communicative competence. Additionally, if there will be an oral baccalaureate test, teachers will not neglect the speaking and listening skills.

What is more, the questions should be clear and concise to enable the students to have time to answer, rather than waste it to think about what the question is requiring. In the second part, "writing expression," it is preferable that students will be tested by only one topic rather than making than losing time on choosing which case they should take. All in all, the study confirmed the research hypothesis, and the EFL Baccalaureate exam can be well designed by keeping in mind the EFL Instructional goals are to prepare students who are competent performers, critical thinkers, and efficient learners, not students who are interested in getting high scores and grading without being communicatively competent.

Recommendations:

In light of finding solutions to the research problem, the present research paper puts some suggestions:

- The EFL Baccalaureate exam should cover the low and high-order thinking skills by designing more challenging exam questions that advance the students' cognitive domains.
- Decision-makers must reinforce the implementation of Bloom's Taxonomy in the EFL Pre-service training and in the teaching/learning process.
- Some changes must occur on the EFL Baccalaureate exam question; and add some tasks to test the students' communicative abilities.

Limitations of the Study

Among the limitations of this study is that the researcher intended to analyze more than one EFL baccalaureate topic. The Algerian EFL Baccalaureate is designed under the same format for many years; therefore, the researcher analyzed only one subject (see in the appendix).

Note: 3AS means third of year secondary school

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Appendix

The EFL Baccalaureate exam 2019



الجمهورية الجزائرية الديمقراطية الشعبية
وزارة التربية الوطنية

دورة: 2019

الديوان الوطني للامتحانات والمسابقات
امتحان بكالوريا التعليم الثانوي
الشعبة: لغات أجنبية

المدة: 03 سا و 30 د

اختبار في مادة: اللغة الإنجليزية

على المترشح أن يختار أحد الموضوعين الآتيين:

الموضوع الأول

Part One: Reading
A. Comprehension

(14 points)
(07 points)

Read the text carefully then do the following activities:

Ultimately, all parts of society must share the responsibility for containing corruption because all are willing or unwilling participants as each corrupt transaction requires a "buyer" and a "seller." The government is responsible for dealing with civil servants who engage in extortion and bribery, but it is businesses and individuals who offer bribes to civil servants to obtain certain advantages.

An active, involved, and empowered citizenry is indeed essential to any anti-corruption campaign. Economic reformers can only achieve real gains when a society works firmly and assumes a shared responsibility in combatting corrupt practices, be it collective or individual.

For their part, government institutions, politicians, and bureaucrats must provide the political will to address all such unlawful practices. While all those who are part of the problem must be part of the solution, it would be unrealistic and cost-prohibitive to attempt to eliminate corruption completely. The aim, therefore, is to attain a fundamental increase in honesty, efficiency and fairness.

In this regard, educating and involving the public is a key in preventing corruption; and **this** can take a variety of ways such as awareness campaigns led by the media, nation-wide integrity workshops that discuss and collaborate against corruption, and the introduction of appropriate legislation put into effect by a powerful and integral auditing system.



اختبار في مادة: اللغة الإنجليزية // الشعبة: لغات أجنبية // بكالوريا 2019

4. **WHO** or **WHAT** do the underlined words refer to in the text?

- a. who (§1) b. this (§4)

5. Choose the correct answer. The text is...

- a. Narrative b. Descriptive c. Expository d. Argumentative

B. Text Exploration

(07 points)

1. Find in the text words or phrases that are opposite in meaning to:

- a. drawbacks (§1) ≠..... b. legal (§3) ≠.....

2. Complete the chart as shown in the example.

	Verb	Noun	Adjective
Example	to corrupt	corruption	corrupt
	to assume	.....	.....
	.....	.....	involved
	.....	legislation	.....

3. Combine each pair of sentences with the connectors given between brackets. Make changes where necessary.

- a. Corruption is a widespread problem. All parts of society must fight corruption. (such...that)
 b. Governments are making efforts to eradicate corruption. It is still prevalent in our society. (despite)

4. Circle or write the silent letter in each of the following words:

honesty – campaign – while – fight

5. Reorder the following sentences to get a coherent passage:

- a. That's why since the dawn of human civilization.
 b. Ethics is important to every society.
 c. men have sought to keep the human conduct in check to preserve the peace of society.
 d. as it plays a critical role in shaping the individuals' behaviours.

Part two: Written Expression

(06 points)

Choose **ONE** of the following topics:

Topic one:

You have heard that a friend of yours was asked to give a bribe in order to get a job that he/she is really in need for. Due to his/her difficult situation, he/she was tempted by this offer. Write a letter of about 80 to 100 words to convince him/her not to commit such an offence.

The following notes may help you:

Bribery is unethical – act of dishonesty –have a guilty conscience –illegal and punishable –life to be ruined –favours corrupt people – contribution to mediocrity.

N.B. sign as Ali.

Topic two:

You are a freelance reporter interested in the phenomenon of illegal emigration. You decided to embark with illegal emigrants to experience the hard conditions of their crossing of the Mediterranean Sea and to find out the reasons behind this risky adventure. Write a web article of about 80 to 120 words to sensitise future adventurers about the dangers of illegal emigration.

انتهى الموضوع الأول