



**University of Yasouj**

**Faculty of Literature and Humanities**

**Department of English Language and Literature**

**M. A. Thesis in TEFL**

The Washback Effect of Academic IELTS Test on  
**Learners'** Learning Strategies and Materials They Use

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**By:**

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**October 2013**

**In the name of God**

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By:  
**Mohammad Hassanshahi Raviz**

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**IN**

**Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL)**

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***DEDICATED TO THE SOUL OF MY  
FATHER***

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The Washback Effect of Academic IELTS Test on **Learners'**  
Learning Strategies and Materials They Use

The washback effect of local and international language tests on stake holders has been some extensively studied. There is growing evidence suggesting that examinations, especially high-stakes tests, have powerful washback effects on teaching and learning within different educational contexts (Burrows, 2004; Cheng, 1998; Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman, 1996). Despite the importance of the washback issue and the extensive use of **the Academic IELTS** test, the washback effect of IELTS remains under-researched. The present study **is** an attempt to investigate the washback effect of academic IELTS test on test takers' learning strategies and the types of learning materials which they use in order to get prepared for such a test. The participants of the study were 120 EFL learners attending IELTS preparation classes in different language institutes in Tehran, Shiraz, and Kerman. The data were collected through an instrument consisting of different components dealing with the areas which any test might influence. The data were collected through a washback instrument which consisted of 51 items measured on Likert scale. The data were analyzed through descriptive and inferential statistics. The results of the study indicated that the academic module of IELTS produces significant washback effects on teaching English language at test preparation centers in Iran. The results also showed that Iranian IELTS instructors attempt to teach all academic language needs to the Iranian candidates of IELTS. Also, Iranian language learners make use of a variety of learning strategies in and out of IELTS classrooms. Almost all students prefer to study both general English textbooks and sample IELTS textbooks. They also make use of audiovisual materials such



as films, cassettes, and CDs. The findings of the study have implications for the stake holders.

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# Chapter I

## Introduction

### 1.1. Introduction

International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is one of the most frequently used high stake tests. It is offered jointly by University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (UCLES), the British Council, and the International Development Program (IDP) Education, Australia (Saville & Hawkey, 2004). The test is at present taken by around 200,000 candidates a year at 224 centers in 105 countries, most candidates seeking admission to higher education in the United States, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, etc. This test is a task-based testing system which assesses the language skills candidates need to study or train in the medium of English. It has four modules—listening, reading, writing, and speaking—all calling for candidates to process authentic text and discourse (Saville & Hawkey, 2004).

IELTS is of two forms, the Academic Module and the General Training Module. As the name suggests, the Academic Module is designed for those seeking admission to undergraduate and postgraduate courses, and was chosen as

the focus of the present study. This module assesses all four macro-skills through a variety of tasks that are designed to simulate genuine study tasks, within the constraints of a 3-hour test. Therefore, IELTS is intended to have a positive washback effect, in the sense of encouraging candidates to develop their language proficiency in ways that will assist their study through the medium of English. Individual performances in speaking and writing are rated according to a description of an acceptable performance at each level (Hayes & Read, 2008). The results of each of the skill areas are reported as band descriptors on a scale of 0–9 (*non-user* through *expert user*) and an overall band score is calculated (UCLES, 2000).

Like candidates from all **non-English speaking countries**, Iranian candidates' language proficiency is assessed through either IELTS or the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). A minimum of 5 **or** 6 out of 9 is the set criterion for entry to the universities in **the** English speaking countries. Therefore, there has been a rapid growth in English language teaching programs in either **public** or private sectors as prospective English as foreign language learners seek to meet the English language requirement in preparation for entry into tertiary study ( Alibakhshi, Kiani, & Akbari, 2012).

Like all tests and examinations, because of its importance IELTS should have several characteristics including validity, reliability, and washback validity. The present study is limited to the washback impact of IELTS.

Over the past decades, an increasing number of research studies have been conducted particularly within the English as a second/foreign language



(ESL/EFL) context to study the multifaceted nature and the mechanism of washback effects of language testing on aspects of teaching and learning ( Cheng, 2008). There is clear evidence to suggest that examinations, especially high-stakes tests, have powerful washback effects on teaching and learning within different educational contexts (Burrows, 2004; Cheng, 1998; Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman, 1996)

According to Alderson and Wall (1993) washback or backwash refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning and it has become a **rapidly increasing** phenomenon in education—what is assessed becomes what is valued, which becomes what is taught . There are at least two major types of washback or backwash studies: those relating to multiple-choice, large-scale, traditional tests which are believed to have had mainly negative impacts on the quality of teaching and learning (Wall, 1996; 1997; 1998; 2000; 2005), and the studies where a specific examination or test has been modified and improved upon (e.g., performance-based assessment), to exert a positive impact on teaching and learning (Ross, 2005). However, the second type of studies has shown positive, negative, or no impact on teaching and learning. Moreover, many of those studies have turned to lay emphasis on understanding the mechanism of how washback is used to make a change in teaching and learning (Cheng, 1998; Wall, 2000).

The study of washback has resulted in recent developments in language testing, and measurement-driven reform of instruction in general education. Research in language testing has centered on whether and how we assess the specific characteristics of a given group of test takers and whether and how we can incorporate such information into the ways in which we design language tests

(Cheng & Curtis, 2009). One of the most important theoretical developments in language testing in the past 30 years has been the realization that a language test score represents a complex of multiple influences. Language test scores cannot be interpreted simplistically as an indicator of the particular language ability we think we are measuring. The scores are also affected by the characteristics and contents of the test tasks, the characteristics of the test takers, the strategies test takers employ in attempting to complete the test tasks, as well as the inferences we draw from the test results. These factors undoubtedly interact with each other.

The washback effect of local and international language tests on stakeholders has been somewhat studied. For example, Alibakhshi, et al. (2012; 2009) have studied the impact of ESP tests on teaching ESP at Iranian universities. They have also investigated the consequences which these tests have on the test takers. Despite the great importance of the washback issue on one hand and the great use of academic IELTS test on the other hand, no one has tried to investigate the washback effect of this high stake test on IELTS test takers in terms of test taker's learning strategies and materials they use. The present study is an attempt to investigate the washback effect of academic IELTS test on test takers' learning strategies and the types of learning materials which they use in order to get prepared for such a test.

## **1.2. Statement of the Problem**

It has been argued that tests can influence different aspects of a curriculum including teaching materials, teaching methods, **learners'** achievement, society,

etc. (Alderson & Buck, 1993; Bachman, 2009, 1991, 1990; Bailey, 2005; Cheng, 2004; Cheng, 2008; Hughes, 1988, 1989, 1991, 2003; Pearson, 1988).

Like all language tests, the academic module of IELTS which is used to assess the readiness of candidates to study through the medium of English and is widely used as a selection tool by universities and other educational institutions, can have positive and negative impacts on the stake holders. Despite the greater number of the studies on washback of different tests on the stake holders as well as different components of curriculum, no one has yet studied the impacts of academic module of IELTS on materials which are used by test takers' to get prepared for IELTS. Moreover, it is not yet known whether IELTS can influence learning activities of Iranian IELTS takers.

### **1.3. Research Questions**

This study **aims to investigate** the impacts of academic module of IELTS on Iranian candidates' language learning activities. It also aimed at studying the impact of this test on materials which are studied by these test takers to get prepared for such a test. More specifically the following research questions were raised.

1. What washback effects may an IELTS test have on **learners'** learning activities and strategies?
2. What washback effects may an IELTS test have on the language materials used by Iranian English language learners?

#### **1.4. Significance of the Study**

Testing is an important element of curriculum. A good test can make positive changes to the curriculum and can influence the test takers positively. The results of the present study can be of much significance to applied linguists, test designers, test users, test takers, material developers, and language teachers. This study is significant to test designers to make a change in the current testing method in order to contribute to teaching methods and make a change in the rate and quality of language learning among the test takers. Moreover, material developers might match the contents of the materials with the content and methods of the tests. Test users, also, should know that a test which does not have positive impact on the test takers' learning activities and does not lead to improvements in language teaching are not valid enough and must be used with great care. They should also try to minimize the negative consequences of these tests as much as they can.

#### **1.5. Definition of the Key Terms**

The key terms used in the present study are academic module of IELTS, learning activities, and teaching materials. Each of these terms is defined in details as follows: