

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction

It has long been believed that tests directly influence educational processes in various ways. Tests serve a number of functions in society, ranging from 'encouraging higher levels of competence and knowledge' and 'checking patronage and corruption' to 'allocating sparse places in higher education' and 'measuring and improving the effectiveness of teachers and schools' (Eckstein and Noah, 1993). One common assumption is that teachers will be influenced by the knowledge that their students are planning to take a certain test, and they will adapt their teaching methodology and lesson content to reflect the demands of the tests. As Madaus states, 'It is testing, not the "official" stated curriculum, that is increasingly determining what is taught, how it is taught, what is learned' (Madaus, 1988, cited in Spratt, 2005, p.5). The term 'backwash' has been used to refer to the way a test affects teaching materials and classroom management (Hughes, 1989), although within applied linguistics and language testing community the term 'washback' is more widely used today. However, Hughes proposes that generally the concept of washback is classified as either negative (harmful) or positive (beneficial). For him, negative washback occurs when the content or format of a test is based on a narrow definition of language ability, and so constraints the teaching/learning context, whereas positive washback takes place when testing procedures cater for 'good' teaching practice, for instance, when an

oral proficiency test is introduced in the test expecting that it will promote the teaching of oral skills. Similarly, Briggs (1996) puts forward that positive washback results from good tests which cover all the aspects of the focal construct, while negative washback is related to teaching to the test and drilling in order to boost test scores.

In recent years, there has been considerable attention towards the issue of the probable test consequences beyond just classroom and educational settings. Nowadays, tests play important roles in individuals' life, for example, in many countries people are required to submit their TOEFL scores to the companies to which they apply, or they are required to pass it for admission to a university or college in Canada or United States, or even in some non-English speaking countries such as Iran. In Iran, PhD applicants are required to pass TOEFL as the very requirement of being allowed to take part in a PhD exam. Shohamy (2001) views washback as one aspect of the effects that tests may have on education and society. The educational effects refer to the curricular, instructional, methodological, and assessment changes which occur due to the introduction of tests. The societal effects are related to the aspects such as gate-keeping, ideology, fairness, morality, and ethicality. In most cases, washback is associated with the impact of external, large-scale or standardized tests on instruction and learning in schools or test preparation courses (Briggs, 1995, cited in Fourneir-Kowaleski, 2005).

As it is clear from various definitions given for washback effect, its influence is vast in the society. It affects the individuals such as test takers and their teachers who help them to become prepared for the tests. Also, its impact is reflected in the ways such as the test takers studying hard for a test, and the teachers trying to teach commensurate with the prospective test in order to improve students' scores. Obviously, this is emanated from the fact that within the testing system individuals are evaluated and judged based on the test results; as researchers have pointed out tests are endowed with considerable power (Herman & Golan, 1991; Linn, 1992; Madaus, 1988; Romberg, Zarinnia & Williams, 1989; Stodolsky, 1988, cited in Mi O, K., 2001).

1.2. Research context

The study of washback is culturally and socially bound. The influence of certain exams on teaching and learning is largely determined by the function of the examination system as well as the education system under study. Therefore, the educational context needs to be studied before studying specific areas of teaching and learning in relation to the examination (Cheng, 2005).

1.2.1. Education in Iran

In general, the educational system in Iran comprises the following levels:

- Pre-school or kindergarten
- Five year elementary school education
- Three year junior high school education
- Three year high school education
- One year pre-university education (most of high school/pre-university graduate students have to pass the university entrance exam)
- Two-to four-year college or university education
- Two-to three-year masters studies
- Four to five year doctoral studies

1.2.2. English education in Iran

English learning situation in Iran is EFL. The major difference between EFL and ESL is that in an ESL context, English is taught in an educational situation where English is the partial or universal medium of instruction for other subjects, while in an EFL context, the language is taught in an educational situation where instruction in other subjects is not normally given in English (Prator, 1991, cited in Lei-Mei, 2002).

Previously, before 2004, English education in Iran formally started from the second grade at junior high school. Starting from 2004, English teaching begins from the first grade of junior high school. According to the Curriculum Standards of English education in the Ministry of Education, the instruction time is as follows:

- two hours per week for the first grade of junior high school
- four hours per week for the second grade of junior high school
- three hours per week for the first grade of high school
- two hours per week for the second grade of high school
- two hours per week for the third grade of high school
- four hours per week for the pre-university classes

However, the Ministry of Education compiles, develops and publishes textbooks and teaching materials for both public and private schools.

Traditional English education in Iran puts an emphasis on reading skills. It seems that it is rooted in the desire for developing students' translation and reading abilities in order to make them ready for reading and translating materials written in English. Thus, the curriculum aims at promoting students' grammar knowledge in reading and translation. Most teachers, therefore, implement a combination of GTM, Reading

Approach and Audio Lingual Methods in their classrooms to meet the expectations of the official curriculum.

1.2.3. University Entrance Exam in Iran

As Wise (2006, cited in Karabulut, 2007) argues, college entrance exams have long been a critical screen for students wishing to attend more selective colleges, and nearly all institutions of higher education in Iran admit students through university entrance exams administered by the Education and Assessment Organization. Thus, high school graduates have to take university entrance exam in order to enter colleges or universities.

The item types, regarding English section of the university entrance exam, include mainly MC (multiple choice), cloze tests, and recognition type items with an objective to test students' grammar knowledge and reading comprehension skills instead of their communicative competence. Thus, students' oral and aural capabilities as well as productive skills are entirely neglected in it.

1.3. Rationale of the study

Because of the aforementioned shortages of the university entrance exam and the reason that English is not mainly used for social interactions in high school EFL classes, the only opportunities for Iranian

students to use English is in private language institutes. University entrance exam has paramount significance in Iranian education due to the fact that the educational system of this country works through this high stake test as a device for the selection of the candidates into the various existing majors. Moreover, universities usually work as selection devices for the graduates entering the job market in Iran. Thus, the English language exam, as one of the important constituents of this high stake test is perceived to have a significant impact on English classes in Iran. University entrance exam does not that much caters for communicative aspects of language teaching and learning. Oral skills, i.e. speaking and listening are not included in the exam and its focus is primarily on reading, grammar, and vocabulary which lead to the inclusion of the same language components in the high school English classes. In other words, teachers in accordance with the exam direction put the oral communicative skills of the language aside at the expense of other skills, especially reading and structure. EFL teaching in Iranian school education starts at junior high school first grade with only one session per week and then in the second grade it increases into two sessions per week. It is mainly based on a combination of Grammar Translation Method, Audiolingual Method, and Reading Approach. Anyway, lots of complaints are heard for this paucity of communicative language ability on the part of students, university instructors and professors, high school and university graduates.

All in all, it seems that there is something wrong. This study will be an endeavor to find out how Iranian high school English language teachers perceive the impact of university entrance exam on the process of teaching and learning and it is hoped that it will cast light on the issue of the washback effect which the English section of the university entrance exam exercises on high school EFL classes in Iran.

The researcher's interest for this survey comes from her own experience both as an EFL learner in an exam-driven system and as an EFL teacher in such a system. Because students have to pass a highly demanding test in order to get into university, the only thing they have to do is to practice for the test. It seems that since the exam is structure-based, they are never required to be prepared for the productive language skills such as writing and speaking. Seemingly, students might leave out some essential parts of language learning while cramming for the structure-oriented test. It seems that students who are accepted in language education departments of even some leading universities in Iran have noticeable problems with their spoken and written English if they didn't take part in any institute English classes and relied merely upon school EFL classes. That is why the researcher of this study wanted to conduct a study on the impacts of the test on language teaching and learning in high school English classrooms and its relationship with some other related

areas of EFL learning/teaching in high school context from the teachers' points of view.

1.4. Statement of the problem

Like many other language tests, the high stake EFL test within university entrance exam may have its own negative washback effects on English language education. Despite dramatic shifts in English teaching/learning from Grammar Translation Method to Communicative Language Teaching Method with all its newest trends and innovations practical in many countries, English teaching in Iran still tends to be limited to the very traditional approaches of the past with highly restricted scope of focus on some language components only including grammar and reading. Undoubtedly, school English teaching in Iran is limited to written English texts and focuses almost exclusively on reading skills for the reason that the majority of test items of EFL test within university entrance exam focuses on reading and structure. This kind of teaching has led to frequent criticism that English education in Iran is "**mute**" learning, meaning that despite years of English education, people still can not speak the language. In spite of the fact that Iranian students have learned English for about 6-7 years at least, from junior high school to college, most are unable to cope with a simple conversation in English. As a result, it seems logical that many educators

may argue that university entrance exam English test should be changed to solve the "mute learning" problem.

Based on these criticisms, it seemed necessary to investigate what kind of impact English test within university entrance exam has on high school EFL teaching/learning according to the teachers' perceptions.

1.5. Purpose and significance of the study

In investigating the relationship between the English section of the university entrance exam and the classroom teaching in English teachers' points of view, this study aimed to contribute to the field of TEFL. The purpose of this study was to understand how English teachers in Iranian high schools perceive the impact of university entrance exam on their curricular planning and instruction. As Chen (2002) cites, the general education literature in the foreign language testing field indicates six main dimensions influenced by washback that most teachers perceive. The six dimensions are: 1) syllabus design, 2) methods of teaching, 3) contents, 4) classroom activities or time arrangement, 5) instructional materials, and 6) classroom assessment. So the major concern of this study was to investigate the high school English teachers' perceptions about university entrance exam in order to find out how their goals and actions regarding the curricular planning and instruction were influenced by the impact of the university entrance exam. If this project can be successful in indicating

that the EFL section of the university entrance exam exercise a washback effect on high school EFL classes and "learning products" are also influenced by this effect, the outcome of this study will be hopefully advantageous to students as the stakeholders and it would inform them about their real L2 learning needs and empower them and their teachers to demand alterations in content of the curriculum that they really need for their L2 learning. It's worthy to mention here that such changes in L2 learning program are the job of curriculum developers and test designers. Such changes can then be implemented in the classrooms.

1.6. Research Questions and hypothesis

The purpose of this study was to address the following major and minor research questions:

- How do language teachers in high schools and pre-university centers perceive the consequence of University Entrance Exam on Iranian high school content of EFL teaching in the classroom (textbook content, classroom activities, language components, and methods of teaching...)?

Out of the above major question the following minor questions can be raised:

According to EFL teachers:

- What type of skills is the focus of EFL teaching/learning in high school classes?
- What type of skills is intended to be measured by the test and is high school EFL classes' skill selection aligned with the university entrance exam skill selection?
- What kinds of activities are mainly used in high school English classrooms and which communicative features are primarily offered by those activities?
- What are communicative features of high school EFL course books?
- What are the aims of English learning/teaching in high school context?
- What are the perceptions of the teachers about learners' interest and motivation towards EFL learning/teaching?
- How do teachers perceive EFL learning/teaching in high school context with regard to its relevance to issues like language proficiency, fluency,... ?

- What are teachers' personal beliefs about EFL learning/teaching irrespective of university entrance exam impact and high school EFL teaching methodologies?

Based on the above major research question, the following research hypothesis is put forward:

H1. Based on high school English teachers' points of view, University Entrance Exam affects, in some ways, the Iranian high school content (textbook content, language components, classroom activities, methods of teaching,...) of EFL teaching/learning in the classrooms.

1.7. Limitations of the study

The scope of this study was limited to the teachers' perceptions of the relationship between English section within university entrance exam and EFL learning/teaching in high school classrooms. Therefore, this very study only relied on the viewpoints of the participants but not on what actually goes on in high school EFL classrooms.

Another limitation of the study is that the only participants of this study were teachers. Thus, other stakeholders such as high school and university students as well as EFL professors were not included in this

study. Furthermore, participants of this study were selected only from among the high school EFL teachers of Tehran and its suburban areas.

Within the limitations of this study, reliability of some subscales of the questionnaire proved as to be unacceptable. However, this study needs modifications in this regard in the case of any probable replications.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF

THE LITERATURE

2.1. Introduction

This chapter contextualizes the current study within the framework of a literature review of the definitions of wash back including positive or negative wash back effect and aims at summarizing wash back studies done in different parts of the world. Limited to the scope of this very study some issues related to the intended or unintended consequences of external tests are highlighted.

Since a few decades ago, it has been argued that tests have had powerful influence on learners who are planning to take the tests, teachers who are helping the test takers to pass the tests, and the other participants who are engaged in curriculum development and course designing (Baily, 1994, cited in Fourneir-Kowaleski, 2005). The washback effects of large-scale testing programs on education are widely argued. In the view of instructors and students, such tests contain what students must learn and therefore what must be taught- a reasonable view, given that the tests in many cases represent the language hurdle students must clear before continuing their academic careers (Chapelle & Douglas, 1993).

Tests are often understood as exerting a conservative force which hinders progress. As Andrews and Fullilove (1994) claim, "Not only have many tests failed to change, but they have continued to exert a powerful negative washback effect on teaching" (p. 57). Moreover, they point out that educationalists often decry the 'negative' washback effects of

examinations and view washback as an impediment to educational reform or 'progressive' innovation in schools. In the present study, it is attempted to define washback and to review the research studies on the language tests, on stakeholders such as test takers and teachers as well as on learning and teaching processes.

2.2. What are highstake tests?

High-stakes testing refers to tests whose results are seen, correctly or incorrectly, by students, teachers, administrators, parents, or the general public as the basis upon which important decisions are made that immediately and directly affect the student. They have serious consequences or trigger actions (e.g., contribute to selection, merit evaluation, promotion, retention, or take-over decisions) (Smith & Rottenberg, 1991; Madaus, 1988). The impact of the tests also brings the issue of fairness in testing because tests are very powerful instruments which can determine the future of individuals and programs, and this power of tests may be tempted to use for different purposes (Shohamy, 2000).

Regarding test impact, Bachman and Palmer (1996) believe that one of the six qualities of the test usefulness is the kind of impact a test has on individuals, educational context, and society. As to this, they argue that

the impact of test use operates at both micro and macro levels. By micro level impacts, they refer to the stake-holders-students and teachers- who are directly affected by the testing procedure and the results. Macro level impacts, on the other hand, refer to the effects of tests on educational contexts and society in a broader sense. As an aspect of impact, washback, which can be defined simply as the effects of testing on teaching and learning, has been of interest to language testing researchers even though they have used different terminologies for the same concept (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). They note, however, that washback is a more complex phenomenon than simply the effect of a test on teaching and learning. Instead, they feel that the impact of a test should be evaluated with reference to the contextual variables of society's goals and values, the educational system in which the test is used, and the potential outcomes of its use.

McNamara (1998) sees washback as an issue related to ethics and accountability and the extent to which the test influences teaching and learning. Hamp-Lyons (1997) refers to washback as a set of beliefs about the relationship between testing, teaching and learning. Bachman and Palmer (1996) take the term washback as a sub-unit of test impact which is one of the six qualities of test usefulness, and define it as a direct impact of testing on individuals and claim that it is widely assumed to exist. Ryan

(2002) refers to wash back as consequential aspects concerned with score meaning and the intended and unintended consequences of assessment use.

Pearson (1988) points out that public examinations influence the attitudes, behaviors, and motivation of teachers, learners and parents, because examinations often come at the end of a course, and this influence is seen working a wash back direction, hence the term "wash back". Similarly, Alderson and Wall (1993) emphasize the fact that evidence of wash back is typically demonstrated in behavioral and attitudinal changes in teachers and learners that are associated with the introduction of tests bearing important educational consequences. That is why new tests are introduced when there is a need to change the curriculum. Examples can be seen in Sri Lanka (Wall and Alderson, 1993), in China (Qi, 2005), in Hong Kong (Cheng, 1997, 2005), in Japan (Buck, 1998; Watanabe, 1996), and in several other countries. Shohamy, Donista-Schmidt, Ferman (1996) claim that the use of tests aiming at scaling and standardizing an entire population has been a characteristic of centralized educational systems, which explains the situation in the countries mentioned above. As Shohamy (1992) asserts, in such settings, tests are viewed as the primary tools through which changes in the educational system can be introduced without having to change other educational components such as teacher training or curricula.