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**The Washback Effect of  
English Translation Major Examinations  
at Payame Noor University**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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IN THE NAME OF GOD,  
THE COMPASSIONATE,  
THE MERCIFUL

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Running head: THE WASHBACK EFFECT OF PNU FINAL EXAMINATIONS

**The Washback Effect of  
English Translation Major Examinations  
at Payame Noor University**

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## **Abstract**

The notion of washback (or backwash) is a common term in language teaching and testing, and tests are considered to be powerful determiners of what goes on in classrooms. The connection between testing, teaching and learning is addressed by a number of terms with washback being one which refers to the influence of tests on teaching and learning.

The aim of this study was to investigate whether Payame Noor University Translation Major final examinations have any washback effect on teaching and learning and if so, what kind of washback effect it might have. This study also compared the effect of final examinations and the effect of other factors on teaching methodology at PNU. After conducting the pilot study, data collection was conducted by using two questionnaires and an observation scheme. Data were analyzed through descriptive statistics, Chi-square test, independent t-test, one-way ANOVA, and Pearson Correlation. The results indicated that PNU Translation Major final examinations have washback effect on teaching and learning and this washback effect is more positive than negative. The results also indicated that the effect of final examinations and the effect of other factors on teaching methodology is the same at this university.

## Chapter 1

### *Introduction*

#### *1.1. Overview*

Testing has often been a universal feature of social life and man has always been put to test to prove his qualifications and capabilities. The use of tests in modern societies is increasing rapidly, say, from encouraging higher levels of competence and knowledge to measuring and improving the effectiveness of schools and teachers (Eckstein and Noah, 1993 in Wall, 2000).

According to Kheirkhah, 2002, any society needs improvement and most people state that educators are the people who are more responsible in this regard. So education is really the most important social task and its processes and products should be constantly evaluated. For example, Eggleston (1984 in Wall, 2000) says that for students, tests are a differentiating ritual" and schools' reputations and teachers can be strengthened or weakened with the publication of test results. Therefore, all people involved in the education process work to achieve particular educational objectives, and it is natural that they want to make sure to what extent those goals have been obtained. Testing and evaluation are the essential means which help people to see if those objectives have been realized.

What is true of teaching in general is also true of language testing. Testing is an inevitable part of language teaching and learning. Tests are not prepared to assess what people do not know, but to assess what they really know.

Wall (2005) suggested that examinations, particularly public examinations used for selection and accreditation purposes, have a powerful effect on what happens in education. Some educators emphasize the positive effects both on practice and policy:

A well-designed examination system can monitor and measure achievement and occasionally aptitude, provide performance feedback to individual

districts, schools and students, inform education officials about the overall strengths and weaknesses of their education systems, and suggest directions for change and improvement. (Heyneman and Ransom, 1990:180)

Indeed examinations are often used as a key component in introducing educational change , both in countries with well-resourced education systems (see Lam 1993 and Cheng 1997 in Hong Kong; and Shohamy, Donista Schmidt and Ferman 1996 in Israel) and others whose systems are less well-funded (see Kellaghan and Greaney 1992 on the impact of examinations in developing countries). It is argued that using examinations to promote change is particularly effective in countries where there is less money to invest in items that boost learning such as instructional materials, textbooks, good teachers and teacher training (Heyneman and Ransom 1990:177). In these situations examinations " ... can be a powerful, low cost means of influencing the quality of what teachers teach and what students learn in school " (Heyneman and Ransom 1990:178).

Many educators believe that it is futile to attempt to change the curriculum without making changes in the way it is assessed. The most innovative and up-to-date curriculum packages will not succeed unless assessment and examination procedures and formats are correspondingly revised. (Woods 1988:200)

Others, however, take a more cynical view. Madaus, for example, predicts only negative consequences if examinations are used as the primary motivating power of the educational process. Measurement-driven instruction invariably leads to cramming; narrows the curriculum; concentrates attention on those skills most amenable to testing ...; constrains the teachers and students; and finally demeans the professional creativity and spontaneity of judgment of teachers. (Madaus 1988:85)

Little attention was given to examination impact in language education until the early 1990s. Before then there were only a few references to the power of tests in different

educational settings (e.g. Malaysia (Davis 1985), Turkey (Hughes 1988a), and China (Li 1990)).

Several test-development projects had been set up with the intention of creating positive impact on some aspects of learning and teaching (e.g. Swain 1985 and Pearson 1988), yet there was little analysis of the results of such endeavors, and also innovators had little evidence to refer to when making decisions about the role of examinations in their own reform programs.

### ***1.2. Statement of the problem***

Final examinations dominate the educational system of Iran. Most teachers plan and conduct their teaching methodologies with an eye fixed firmly on the requirement of the final examinations in their subjects.

Assessment is used by and has an impact on schools, universities and employers. In addition, assessment is also expected to have an impact on what and how teachers teach. According to Linn (1992), each of the consequences needs to be evaluated and the intended effects of assessment systems on teaching and learning should be identified. An important assumption behind the current beliefs about examination consequences is that deleterious effects on teaching and learning can be overcome by switching to alternative assessments. The intended impact is to positively influence the teaching by moving away from traditional behaviorist approaches towards the new philosophy of constructivist model of learning.

The focus of the current study is to determine whether Translation Major final examinations of Payame Noor University (PNU) have any washback effect on teaching and learning in this university and whether this washback effect is more positive or negative.

### ***1.3. Significance of the study***

This study explores the concept of washback effect by tracing its origin and discussing various terms that have been used to describe this educational phenomenon.



This is one of the few washback studies that has employed both quantitative and qualitative data especially classroom data, to study washback. This study explores why and how washback influences aspects of teaching and learning within the educational system of distance education. It explores the washback effect of Translation Major final examinations of PNU through investigating students' and teachers' attitudes towards aspects of learning and teaching and it also aims to determine the type of washback effect of those examinations. This study can be considered the first study of its own kind for improving learning and teaching methodologies of PNU considering the washback effects of final examinations of this university.

If an examination is to have the impact intended, educators and measurement specialists need to consider a range of factors that affect how the change succeeds or fails and how it influences teachers' and students' attitudes and behaviors. Alderson and Wall (1993) have pointed out that language testers should pay more attention to the washback effect of their tests, but they should also guard against oversimplified beliefs that "good" tests will automatically have a "good" impact.

#### ***1.4. Purpose of the study***

All people involved in the education process work to achieve particular educational objectives and it is natural that they want to make sure to what extent those goals have been obtained. Testing and evaluation are the essential means which help them to see if those objectives have been realized.

The purpose of this study is to:

1. Study the phenomenon of the washback effect in the light of measurement-driven instruction.
2. Understand how the main participants of this study within the PNU educational context reacted to the final examinations of this university.

3. Explore the nature and scope of the washback effect on aspects of professors' and students' perceptions, and professors' behaviors within the context of PNU final examinations.
4. Explore the type of washback effect of PNU Translation Major final examinations.
5. Explore the effect of final examinations and the effect of other factors on teaching methodologies at PNU to investigate which one is more effective.

### ***1.5. Research questions***

Specific questions this research aimed to answer were:

1. Do PNU Translation Major final examinations have any washback effect on teaching and learning of English at this university?
2. What kinds of washback do PNU Translation Major final examinations have, positive or negative?
3. Which one has more impacts on teaching methodology at PNU, final examinations or other factors including difficult aspects of teaching?

### ***1.6. Research hypotheses***

The hypotheses that the researcher was to investigate in this study were as follows:

H<sub>0</sub>: PNU Translation Major final examinations have no washback effect on the teaching and learning of English at this university.

H<sub>1</sub>: The washback effect of PNU Translation Major final examinations is more positive than negative.

H<sub>2</sub>: PNU Translation Major final examinations have more impacts on teaching methodology than the other factors.

### ***1.7. Definition of key terms***

#### ***1.7.1. Washback effect***

The power of test in influencing the reputation of teachers and schools means that they can have a strong influence on the curriculum. The effect of tests on teaching and learning is

known as test washback. The notion of washback or (backwash) is common in language teaching and testing, and tests are considered to be powerful determiners of what goes on in classrooms. The connection between testing, teaching and learning is addressed by a number of terms: "washback" refers to the influence that tests have on teaching and learning; "measurement-driven instruction" refers to the idea that test drives learning; "curriculum alignment" deals with the modification of curriculum based on testing results; and "systemic validity" deals with the impact of tests which leads to instructional and curricular changes that foster the development of the cognitive skills that the test is after (Shohamy, et al., 1996). Washback from tests can involve teachers and students as well as whole classes and programs.

Test and test results have consequences beyond just the classroom. Bachman and Palmer (1996) considered washback to be a subset of test's impact on educational system, society and individuals. They believed that test impact operates at two levels: the micro level, i.e. the effect of the test on individual students and teachers; and the macro level or the impact the test may have on society and the educational system.

Although washback is a relatively new theme in language education, it has long been discussed in general education. Wiseman (1961 in Wall, 2000) argued that tests should be judged not only by their 'technical efficiency' but also by whether they were 'educationally profitable'.

### ***1.7.2. Positive and negative washback effect***

According to Bachman (1990), positive washback occurs when the assessment used reflects the content and skills taught in the classroom. However, in many cases and particularly in high stakes testing, the curriculum is driven by the assessment leading to negative washback. Positive washback refers to expected test effects. For example, a test may encourage students to study more or may promote a connection between standards and instruction. Negative

washback refers to the unexpected, harmful consequences of a test. For example, instruction may focus too heavily on test preparation at the expense of other activities. When a test is very important (e.g. university entrance examination), then preparation for it can come to dominate all teaching and learning activities. If there are no conflicts in the aims and activities of testing and teaching, testing supports teaching and then positive washback is assumed to happen. For example, when teaching is communicatively oriented, the use of direct testing tasks in national tests (e.g. interview or listening comprehension) supports communicative teaching and makes teachers, students and material providers move toward achieving communicative objectives, thereby it's producing positive washback.

Conversely, if a test objectives and activities are at variance with the objectives of the course, then there is likely to be negative washback. For example, when an English course objective is to train learners in the language skills (e.g. reading), but language tests do not test this skill directly, that is, they test reading tasks which won't result in behavior that will demonstrate their successful completion. For example, instead of demanding test-takers to make inferences, construct main ideas, scan, skim, form conclusions, etc., the underlying knowledge of reading comprehension, i.e., grammar and vocabulary may be tested which negatively influences the development of reading comprehension.

On the whole, washback is viewed as positive or negative to the extent it promotes or impedes the achievement of educational goals set by learners or program authorities.