

In the Name of God
The Beneficent,
The Merciful

Payame Noor University

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Title:

**A study of the Washback effect of EFL Test of Entrance Examination
Of Iranian State Universities on EFL Teaching
In the Pre-university context**

Supervisor:

Dr.Fatemeh Hemmati

Advisor:

Dr. Hasan Iravani

By:

Yosef Mohammadzadeh

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Dedicated To

My family

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of English language teachers in Mashhad who teach students in the Pre-university cycle perceived the impact of the EFLTEE on their teaching. The target population was nearly all Pre-university English language teachers in seven districts of Mashhad in the scholastic year 2008/2009. A survey questionnaire which consisted of (36) Likert type items, was used in order to collect the required data. The questionnaire was divided into two parts. The first part of the study aimed at measuring how the EFLTEE affected English language teachers' teaching in terms of four domains: activity/time arrangement, teaching methods, materials teachers would use in the classroom and content teachers would teach. The second part of the questionnaire, however, investigated the effect of other factors related to the EFLTEE on teachers' teaching or method selection in terms of four domains: students' learning attitudes, teachers' professionalism in teaching, teachers' perceived external pressure in teaching, and perceived importance of the EFLTEE. Findings of the study indicated that both the EFLTEE and the other related factors affected English language teachers' teaching with a slight statistical difference in favor of the EFLTEE washback effect. The results, also, showed that two types of washback existed in Pre-university schools in Mashhad namely: positive and harmful washback. In light of the results, the present study recommended that: 1) teachers' should be provided with professional development opportunities, 2) teachers' monitoring and evaluation policy should be reconsidered, and 3) EFLTEE should integrate oral language skills as well.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

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1.1 Introduction

The phenomenon of how external tests influence teaching and learning is commonly described as “backwash” in general education or as “washback” in language instruction. Literature has indicated that testing washback is a complex concept that becomes even more complex under a variety of interpretations of the phenomenon on teaching and learning (Cheng, Watanabe & Curtis, 2004).

Appropriate use of tests can promote teaching and learning. Recent research indicated that tests also influence different educational parties, particularly teachers and students in different ways. Shohamy (1992) in her studies of Arabic as a second language and English as a foreign language for the modified Israeli examinations, indicated “the results obtained from tests can have serious consequences for individuals as well as for programs, since many crucial decisions are made on the basis of test results” (p. 299).

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, which is the belief of some examinations authorities, and probably the general public.

Washback, however, is not restricted to learners and teachers. Bachman and Palmer (1996) consider washback to be a subset of a test’s impact on society, educational systems and individuals. They believe that test impact operates at two levels:

- A. The micro level (i.e. the effect of the test on individual students and teachers); and
- B. The macro level or the impact the test may have on society and the educational system.

Indeed, in this study, which investigates the washback effect of EFL test of entrance examination of state universities in Iran within the context of Pre-university schools, our focus will be more with the wider effects of washback on teaching process.

1.2 Statement of the problem

EFL test as a general subject plays an important role in Entrance examination of state universities in Iran, in which as a whole tends to impress the lives of both students as well as their teachers; in the sense that it is extremely crucial for students' further careers, since National Entrance Examination is considered as a path for more university studies and better employment opportunities. On the other hand, English teachers in the Pre-university schools are also affected by the EFL test of entrance examination, through selecting certain teaching methods and techniques during the teaching/learning process. Therefore, as it will be reported in this study, public examinations like EFL Test of Entrance Examination (EFLTEE) in Iran may be designed in a proper way to promote changes in teaching context. Generally speaking, public examinations have assumed a prominent role in influencing the quality of education. This was reported by many researchers such as (Wall and Alderson, 1996; Cheng, 2001). Specifically, public examinations such as EFLTEE, are powerful devices, in terms of their effect on the teaching and learning process.

As it will be noted in chapter two of this study, the washback effect is a powerful educational phenomenon. It not only influences different people at different levels within educational contexts, but also has an impact on many aspects of teaching and learning in the school curriculum. Studies into such educational phenomenon should decide on research findings about teaching and learning, make references to the existing models of teaching and learning, and also use theories in educational change as resources, since the notion of change is the fundamental principle of the washback phenomenon (Cheng, 2003).

This study can be served to explore some of the ways the university entrance examinations in Iran could be used to make positive washback effects on English language instruction. Although during the past years, a great deal has been written about the quality and appropriateness of examinations as a whole in Iran rarely it has been discussed about the washback effect of these examinations on teaching especially on teaching English in the

Pre-university context. The term “washback” is rarely found in different dictionaries and most English teachers in Iran don’t know anything about it. Recent studies on washback in many foreign countries have multiplied the significance of high-stake tests, because they lead to good results. Madaus (1988, p. 83) stated that “It is testing, not the official stated curriculum, that is increasingly determining what is taught, how it is taught, what is learned, and how it is learned.” This study reviews recent empirical studies of washback to see whether they indicate this to be the case, and if so, why?

The researcher looks at these studies from the point of view of the teacher, whose main concern is generally that of the progress in learning of the group of individuals in their class or classes and their ability as teachers to facilitate that progress. These concerns differ from those of the tester, researcher or educational innovator, whose interests in washback receive attention elsewhere, for example, Bailey, 1999; Wall, 2000.

It is not within the scope of this study to look in detail at the wider implications of testing – as already mentioned we will be primarily concerned with the one area identified by Bailey (1996, pp. 263-264) – i.e. ‘washback to the programme’ . In other words, the researcher will adopt the narrower definition of washback by concentrating on the effects that a test has on teaching.

1.3. Research questions

The research questions provide the framework necessary to make clear the characteristics of teachers’ behaviors and methods that relate to washback.

These questions are as follows:

1. What is the impact of EFLTEE on English language teachers’ teaching in the Pre-university context?
2. What are the factors, if any, that tend to affect English language teachers’ teaching?

1.4. Research hypotheses

On the basis of the above questions, the following null hypotheses are generated:

1. EFLTEE has no impact on English language teachers’ teaching in the Pre-university cycle.

2. There is no factor that tends to affect English language teachers' teaching in the Pre-university cycle.

1.5. Significance of the study

This study is a large-scale empirical study of washback in Iran, and one of the few washback studies that has employed quantitative data. This research provides strong research evidence of the washback effect of the EFL test of national entrance examination on aspects of teaching in the Iranian Pre-university educational system as a whole. Although this investigation provides actual data and evidence of the washback effect in a specific educational context, it should also contribute to the general understanding of washback in education. It also offers some insights into English language teaching and learning in Iranian Pre-university schools. "To judge the value of an outcome or end, one 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" (Haladyna, Nolen. & Haas, 1991, p. 6).

The present study will examine the concept of washback as a phenomenon whose significance in language testing theory and practice stems from its relevance to the implications for a shift of interest in the field of testing. According to the researchers' knowledge, no local studies have been conducted in this specific area of investigation, neither on teachers nor on learners. Factors, mostly due to lack of time, may make the researchers tend to investigate the washback effect, if any, only in small environments in Iran. But this study, however, undertakes investigation in a broader area and deals with the effect of washback on teachers' instruction, as well as, on their teaching methods. Since no studies have been conducted in this area of investigation in Iran, the study is new and hopefully beneficial.

This study, at the important intersection of language testing and teaching practices, presents theoretical, methodological, and practical guidance for current and future washback studies in Iran. This research serves more essential significances by:

*providing an overview of the complexity of washback and the various contextual factors relevant to testing, teaching, and learning; and

*presenting empirical studies from around the world that offer insights into the effects of washback in specific educational contexts and models of research on which future studies can be based.

The extensive use of test scores for various educational and social purposes in society nowadays makes the washback effect a high-interest phenomenon in the day-to-day educational activities of teachers, researchers, program coordinators/directors, policy makers, and others in the field of education (Andrews, 1994). I hope that this empirical study can provide a close link between EFLTEE and English language teaching in the Pre-university cycle, at the same time propose guidelines for EFL teachers who wish to increase their proficiency in teaching methods of English language. The EFL test of Entrance Examination (EFLTEE) is assumed to have an important role in influencing the quality of education.

The main purpose of this study is to investigate how Pre-university English language teachers in Iran perceive the impact of the EFL test of Entrance Examination of State Universities on their teaching. The aim of this study is also to get some issues that are not yet fully discussed in this field and to obtain an in-depth understanding of the washback process integrated with a language assessment component. This research focuses on understanding the mechanism of how EFL test washback of Entrance Examination may be used to change teaching process in the Pre-university cycle in Iran.

1.6. Definition of key terms

There have been used some key words throughout the study, for more clarification they are described and defined as the following:

Washback: Although there is a general consensus about the existence of washback effect, different scholars define it in a different way. But, what is related to this research is the

general definition of washback, that is, the influence of language testing on teaching and learning.

Backwash: Whilst washback is the preferred term in British applied linguistics (Alderson & Wall, 1993), some writers such as Hughes refer to the same phenomenon as ‘backwash’.

High-stake tests: Madaus (1988, 89) refers to high-stake testing as “tests which their results are seen-rightly or wrongly-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.” (For more explanation see section 2.7.3 in this study)

External tests: Those which are produced by testing agencies and Ministries of Education and get much attention from researchers and test developers. They are powerful in providing teachers with the pedagogical knowledge from which they base their own knowledge of how classroom tests should be like (Shohamy, 1992, 1993, 1996).

Pre-university Cycle: Students who complete the general/academic track in high school and pass a national examination are eligible to enter the Pre-university cycle. This phase of education lasts for one year leading to the Certificate of Completion/Diploma. Students who complete the Pre-university cycle are eligible to take the University Entrance Examination for admission to the first year of undergraduate study.

Konkur: The National University Entrance Examination in Iran, called ‘Konkur’, is a national summative assessment, using multiple-choice questions. Konkur is a high-stakes examination that consumes many educational resources and is conducted annually in June.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Learners and Teachers: are those who are learning or teaching English while living in a community where English is not spoken as a first language.

EFLTEE: EFLTEE is the acronym of *EFL Test of Entrance Examination* in this study. The researcher has often used this word instead of using the whole phrase in different parts of the research or the questionnaire. The National University Entrance Examination or Konkur in Iran consists some specialized and four general subjects. The *EFL test* is one of these general subjects that usually includes thirty multiple-choice questions.

1.7. Overview of the study

This study has been organized in a thesis with the following chapters:

In the first chapter of this study it was stated that rarely it has been investigated about the washback effect of public examinations on teaching, particularly on teaching English in the Pre-university context. Therefore there was an attempt to discuss how Pre-university English language teachers in Iran perceive the impact of the EFL test of Entrance Examination of State Universities on their teaching. The main significance is that this empirical study employs quantitative data to provide strong research evidence of the washback effect of EFL test of national entrance examination on aspects of teaching in the Iranian Pre-university educational system as a whole.

The second chapter refers to the theoretical underpinnings and provides a working framework for the study. It reviews washback from several perspectives: theoretical background, the mechanism of this phenomenon, participants in washback, and test impact. It also indicates to some areas affected by washback, then carries on to explore the ways for achieving beneficial washback. The last section of the chapter refers to the three interconnected parts: measurement-driven instruction, examinations as means of control, and the influence of high-stakes testing. It explores why and how washback could work to influence other components within the educational systems.

Methodology of the study will be presented in the third chapter; including subjects participated in the study, the type of instruments were used, procedure, pilot study, and data analyses.

In the fourth chapter findings and discussions related to the first and second question of the study will be presented, respectively. Many tables including the respondents' data, one way ANOVA, and t-test have been applied to analyze these findings and discussions.

Finally, in the last chapter the researcher tries to recommend relevant pedagogical implications consisting of providing teachers with professional development opportunities, changing teacher monitoring and evaluation policy, and developing the EFLTEE, then he goes on to summarize some strategies that language educators in Pre-university cycles can use to promote positive washback: test design strategies, test content strategies, logistical strategies, and interpretation strategies. There are also a few limitations for this research, and the main one is that there are not many existing instruments in the area of washback, which can be decided upon them.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the theoretical underpinnings and makes a working framework for this study. It reviews washback from several perspectives: theoretical background, the mechanism of this phenomenon, participants in washback, and test impact. It also points to some areas affected by washback based on the literature findings, then goes on to indicate the ways for achieving beneficial washback. What is most notable is the large proportion of studies that are essentially prescriptive. These studies deal with the phenomena of washback from different perspectives and in various levels. There are, however, fewer empirical analyses that have investigated the phenomena in the teaching and learning environments. There are even fewer research studies that consider washback at both the macro and micro levels, particularly in language education.

The last section of the chapter refers to ‘exploring the research phenomenon’ which consists of three interconnected parts: measurement-driven instruction, examinations as means of control, and the influence of high-stakes testing. It explores why and how washback could work to influence other components within the educational systems and follows the rationale behind the use of public examination, and its powerful function to change teaching and learning.

2.1 Theoretical background

Washback and other similar related terms such as backwash, test impact, systemic validity, consequential validity, measurement-driven instruction, curriculum alignment, and possibly other terms, all refer to different aspects of the same phenomenon (Cheng, 2005). A number of research studies have been done in this area looking at the relationship between testing and teaching and learning. Shohamy (1993) comments on some of the common terms used to refer to the phenomenon. In general education, the term washback refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning (Alderson and Wall, 1993). Washback has become an increasingly prevalent and prominent phenomenon in education, “what is assessed becomes what is valued, which becomes what is taught” (McEwen, 1995, p.42). “Measurement-driven instruction refers to the notion that test should drive teaching and