

The Washback and Impact of Test on Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract: *Introduction:* For a long time, educational practitioners believed that assessment influence the learning and teaching process in various ways. In some research papers, test impact is considered as the long-term effect or the influence of test educational policy and planning that reflects a higher-level effect. Washback or backwash, however, refers to the immediate or a course-level effect of the test on teaching and learning. Generally harmful (negative) or beneficial (positive) washback is perceived by the learners. Nowadays, educational researches pay significant attention to the assessment and its stakeholders. Still the consequence of the test is not fully communicated to the teachers and learners. Thus, this paper focuses on how washback influence students' learning attitudes through finding the major factors that affect it; teachers' role as agents of promoting washback, and drawing pedagogical implication for teachers. *Objective:* The study aims to explore the impact of tests on teaching and learning. *Method & Material:* The research design is descriptive (article review). In this research, first I sought for the keywords which relate to the research topic through the online databases (Eric and Google Scholars, ELT journal). After reviewing all the collected journals, books and articles, I summarize them and use the information or the parts which directly relate to my research topic. The subject content was the main criterion for selection. Articles describing research on washback and test impact of learning are included. All types of research design considered applicable. Overall restrictions were that articles should be peer-reviewed, written in English, and be published no earlier than 2000. *Results:* Teachers can improve the impact of tests on teaching and learning by aligning test with teaching and content. Major factors in washback are contextual factors, test factors, and teacher factors. Literature indicated that if we want to Change Student learning, we should change the assessment system. *Conclusion:* Tests change the ways teachers teach and the way students learn. The impact of testing is of quite prominent value. The influence of test always exists and at different levels. Teachers are agents of positive washback. Teachers can foster positive impact on teaching and learning. Students hold positive attitude and perception to test when teachers align the assessment with teaching and course outcomes.

Keywords: language testing, test impact, washback, consequences of testing

1. Introduction

The concept of washback emerged from the discussion that testing affects teaching and learning. Scholars argued that testing must drive the instruction. Tests have their effect based on their nature. A high-stake test affects a national level policy and curriculum, while an achievement test affects a specific course. Since a long time, educational practitioners believed that assessment influence the learning and teaching process in various ways. A number of terms are used when scholars refer to the impact of tests on teaching and learning. Some authors use "washback" others use "backwash" and some use impact or effect of the test. The definitions for these terms are slightly different from each author's point of view. In some research papers, test impact is considered as the long-term effect or the influence of test educational policy and planning that reflects a higher level effect. Washback or backwash, however, refers to the immediate or a course-level effect of the test on teaching and learning. Generally harmful (negative) or beneficial (positive) washback is perceived from the learners. Tests can motivate students to study more and establish a connection between instruction and standards. it can also promote the reverse scenario that is the instruction focuses on test preparation at the cost of other activities. Nowadays, educational researches pay significant attention to the assessment and its stakeholders. Still the consequence of the test is not fully communicated to the teachers and learners. Thus, this paper focuses on how washback influence students' attitudes for learning through finding the major

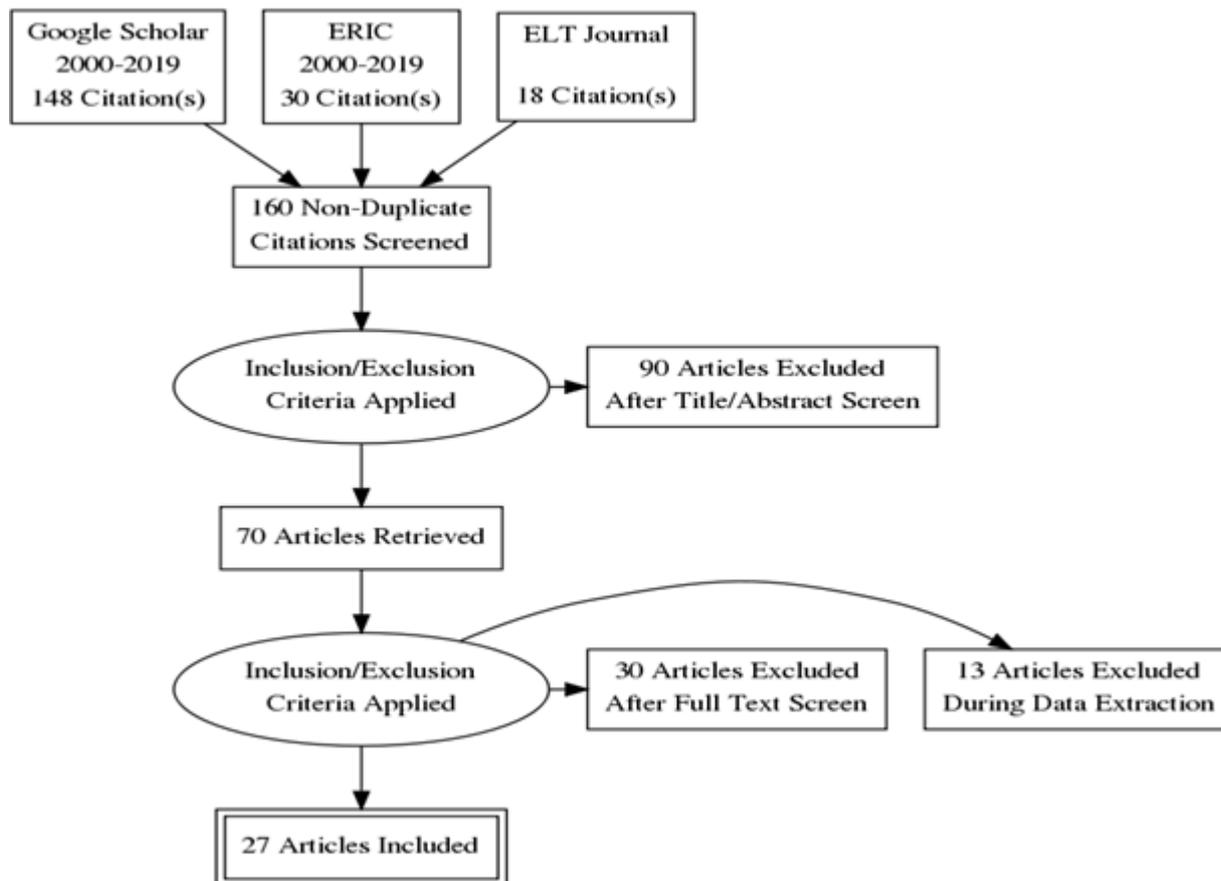
factors that affect it, teachers' role as agents of promoting washback and drawing pedagogical implication for teachers.

Research Questions

- How teachers improve the impact of tests on teaching and learning?
- What are the major factors that affect washback?
- How the washback effect influence the students' perceptions and attitudes for learning?

2. Method and Material

The research design is descriptive (article review). In this research, first I sought for the keywords which relate to the research topic through the online scientific and up to date databases (Eric and Google Scholars, ELT journal) I reviewed articles that explained washback in language testing and its effect on teaching and learning. The articles published between (2000- 2016). After reviewing all the collected journals, books and articles, I summarize them and use the information or the parts which directly relate to my research topic. The subject content (washback, impact, effect of the test) is the main criterion for selection. Articles describing research on washback and test impact of learning in EFL classes are included. All types of research design considered applicable. Overall restrictions were that articles should be peer-reviewed, written in English, and be published no earlier than 2000.



3. Result

The pioneer literature on the topic of washback or impact of test is the work of Latham under the title of "On the Action of Examinations Considered as a Means of Selection". Latham (1877) declared that examination systems have an "encroaching Power". He added that examination can change and influence our view on work and life. Beikmahdavi (2016) considered washback as a useful tool to consider the effects of test results on learners and instructor behavior. The influence of test on teaching and learning is an outcome that is called the effect at the micro-level and the impact at the macro-level. As Thaidan (2015) stated, "Washback has two faces of change, the micro (the effect) and the macro (the impact) scenarios" (P.7). Pan (2008) stated that effects on teaching, learning, teaching material, and score gain are at the micro-level, while innovation and social dimension effects are at the macro level. Over recent decades, the interests of researchers are grown in assessment at the stage that it became a profession. This concept was predicted by Bachman (2000). Bachman believed that language testing may grow as a profession. He added that, in addition to test scores, researchers can investigate more and go beyond the thoughts on the meaning and use it to assure what we test is significant.

4. Major Factors in Washback

Major factors play roles in having a positive or negative influence of tests at both the macro and micro levels. Shih (2009) Created a model for washback in which the major factors are divided into three i.e. contextual factors (course-level factor, School-level factor, and National, social or

broader factor) test factors and teacher factors. Based on this model, each factor is stated respectively.

Contextual factors (National, social or broader factor)

Reviewing five major studies in washback, Pan (2008) stated that test effect on educational context and classroom settings is covered by most of the washback studies; less attention is paid to effect of the test on society. Rea-Dickins and Scott (2007) viewed washback as a "context-specific shifting process" (P.5).

Testing at the national level tends to include a large number of people and involving several stakeholders. Some countries name these tests as high-stake or large-scale test, while other countries have a specific name for it. For example, the name for it in Afghanistan and Iran is Kankoor test. Giving any name to it cannot prohibit the stakeholders from measuring the influence of these tests on teaching and learning. Birjandi and shirkhani (2012) found that changing the language learning and teaching requires change in the content and format of Kankoor. They added that to decrease the negative effect of the test, the content of the exam should be directed to the authentic and communicative situations. Barnes (2016) found that the large-scale test of the language TOEFL iBT effected content and methodology of teaching but these effects were mediated by utilization of preparation material for it. Brown (2002) stated that the 'university entrance examinations' effect affected teaching and learning in high schools. Thaidan (2015) asserted that, currently, tests cause a negative impact on the curriculum. The author added that to make use of test power in terms of advantage to find a positive environment an obvious intention is paid.

Test Factor

Tests are tools that attempt to provide evidence of learning. Salehi, Mustapha, and Yunus (2012) suggested that to have a good test a match between the test and content and format of the curriculum is required. Test drives the teaching. Madaus (1988, as cited in Spratt 2005) suggested 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" (P.5). One of the concerns is that tests are sometimes developed subjectively. Weir (2004) stated that makers of the test must be made responsible for what they produce. The context of using test has an obvious relation with washback. Green (2013) suggested that domestic factors can cause quite different effects. He added that a clear set of evidence is needed to tell as how we use test scores and other learning outcomes in the class

Teacher factor

Teachers are the prominent stakeholder in the washback and impact of tests. They develop the test, give scores, interpret the results and make pedagogical decisions based on them. The influence of test can change these activities. As Rea-Dickins and Scott (2007) stated test affect content than methodology. Green (2013) revealed that test developers and other stakeholders should work to address what is required for participants of the exam to perform well. He added that better engagement of stakeholders such as teachers, administrators, and textbook writers can improve teaching and testing. Teachers, as test designers, should have a broader view of the test. They should design tests that represent several aspects such as learners' needs, materials, and objectives than just focusing on the passing of failing students. Pan and Newfields (2012) expressed that "the alignment of curricula with test content may be one possibility teachers can consider so that they could focus both on receptive and productive skills in class" (p.119). According to Akpinar and Cakildere (2013), "the test designers in Turkey should design and use alternative language assessment tests which include all the dimensions of language performance considering the fact that academicians have to compete with their counterparts in the international arena" (P.89). Teachers pay more attention to those learning concepts that affect test results. Sadighi, Yamini, Bagheri, Yarmohammadi, and Zamanian (2018) indicated that greater attentions of the teachers were aligned to the contents that would assist learners in their examinations. Spratt (2005, as cited in Pan 2009) suggested that teachers play an important role to be the source of developing positive washback. Djurić (2015) stated that teachers' professional development and progressive learning is guaranteed when they share teaching and testing information.

Washback Effect on Students' Perceptions and Attitudes

However the key stakeholder of washback and impact of test is the learner, few studies have been conducted to address the effect of test on students. Cheng (2008) suggested that it is important to focus on the effects of the test on students learning because they gain a straight impact of it. He adds that previous studies lack information on washback on students' perceptions, motivation, and learning. Muñoz and Álvarez (2010) stated that self-assessment improves

washback as the learners feel responsible for their learning and become self-directed learners. Test takers' (mostly students) attitude and learning are influenced by test. Razavipour, Moosavinia and Atayi (2018) found that test-takers let go of the whole English language literature and get a negative attitude towards test when the test is beyond the 'zone of proximal challenge' and want to have a general proficiency of the language. Some test requirements encourage students to put effort and gain the required skills for that test. These types of test have positive effect on students' perceptions towards test. Pan (2014) found English certification exit requirements motivated low-proficiency students to use the resources available in school for test preparation like other intermediate and high proficiency students. Students develop their skills based on the exam they take. Akpinar and Cakildere (2013) stated that three skills in a language test were neglected by the participants. They found that because the exam required individuals to have high reading skills and grammar, they promoted these skills and not the other skills. The lesson being learned from the literature is that if we want to Change Students learning, we should change the assessment system.

5. Discussion

Due to the importance of test impact on the teaching and learning process, there is a growing interest of stakeholders to it. Taylor (2005) noted that because tests are used broadly at national, regional, and international levels, the interest of learners, teachers and other stakeholders will certainly grow. According to Djurić (2015), "Washback needs to be planned, observed, studied and communicated. The process of producing positive washback includes testers and teachers, their training, communication and consistency" (P.26).

Teachers being the change agent for positive impact should bear the responsibility to use the test at all levels appropriately. As Pan (2009) analyzed, teachers play a major role in developing different types of washback both at micro and macro levels. The author added that test has an encouraging factor on teachers as well as a discouraging factor. The encouraging one is that they make their curricula based on students' need and the discouraging factor is that the test might require teaching what teachers do not seem appropriate to students. Based on the fact that assessment is a crucial element of teaching, assessment literacy of teachers contributes to the impact of the test.

According to Elshawa, Heng, Abdullah, and Rashid (2016), increase in the incidences of positive washback of tests is the contribution of having assessment literate teachers. Andrews, Fullilove, and Wong (2002) suggested that it is easy to change time allocation to a skill in the test and teaching contents but changing teaching and learning is not predictable. They added that the unpredictability may occur because of the individual differences among teachers and students. Exams should be wide enough to cover all the dimensions of the teaching content. Akpinar and Cakildere (2013) stated that due to the structure and content of language exams a complete language learning process hardly managed. Thus, they suggest that the language test should be multi-faceted. After reviewing several empirical

studies, Spratt (2005) indicated that only exam cannot tell us what to teach and want to learn. Teachers' role is seemed prominent among the other intervening bodies. This is because teachers are the decision-makers of how to teach and facilitate the learning process.

On one hand, Green (2013) suggested that in order to make required intervention, a comprehensive understanding of washback occurrence in teaching and learning process is necessary. The author suggests that suitable changes such as teacher training or test revision can be introduced when the causes are rightly determined. On the other hand, Thaidan (2015) argued that if there is a mismatch between testing techniques and test content, the result will be harmful backwash. Muñoz and Álvarez (2010) put the responsibility for positive washback on both students and teachers. They stated that as the result of establishing an obvious connection between educational goals and assessment, teachers and students promote positive washback. They tentatively said that because of the ongoing training on assessment practice provided to teachers, positive washback occurred in teaching and learning.

6. Conclusion

Teaching, learning, and testing always have relationships. These relations can be positive or negative. Tests change the ways teachers teach and the way students learn. The impact of testing is of quite prominent value. It can stimulate quality learning and teaching (positive washback) or lead to a breakdown of educational efforts. The influence of test always exists and at different levels. Major factors affecting the washback of students consist of contextual factors, test factors, and teacher factors. Negative impact is not dangerous. It can be addressed as soon as it is detected. Teachers are agents of positive washback. Teachers can foster a positive impact on teaching and learning. Teachers can participate in workshops and training to improve their assessment skills. Students' attitudes toward the impact of tests on their learning can be positive if they assess themselves and track their progress. This way, they have information on their progress and have a positive impact on the test. Students hold a positive attitude and perception to test when teachers align the assessment with teaching and course outcomes.

7. Pedagogical Implications

Keeping in mind the significant role of the impact of tests on teaching and learning, teachers, authorities, universities, material developers, and learners should analyze it for the sake of their improvement. Students should engage in test preparation, teachers should develop assessment skills, authorities and universities should make a consensus of the material development process with teachers' teaching methodology and learners' needs. Since students' learning styles differ and teachers bear this issue in teaching, they should take it into account in the assessment as well. Stakeholders of assessment should have lessons learned from the impact of the test and bring necessary changes at micro and macro levels.

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