

Feedback on Washback of EFL Tests on ELT in L2 Classroom

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Abstract—Every year, competence-based tests for the students of all grades in Iranian high schools are introduced. Such tests are the certain components of high school curriculum; therefore, very much attention should be academically paid to them and particularly to their impact on teaching and learning. This study identifies the possible washback effect of English language tests on English language teaching in high schools and further describes the nature of the washback effect in the context of Iran. In order to do so, the booklets of the English language tests for final exams of all four high schools levels in June 2012 were first analysed. Then, thirty EFL classrooms were randomly observed and a questionnaire was filled up by the teachers of those classes to collect their feedback on the washback effect of the tests. Another questionnaire was filled up by thirty students who were randomly chosen from the same classes for their feedback on the washback as well. The analysed collected data indicates that there is a strong relationship between classroom teaching and what the final tests measure showing the presence of washback in all four levels of English language classes in high schools of Iran which is due largely to the scope of university matriculation in Iran. The results also explain that the nature of existing washback on what EFL teachers teach in L2 classes is negative. The negative impact is possibly resulted due to the existing restrictions of teaching and teachers in Iranian schools to meet the needs of the students just for matriculation.

Index Terms—Washback, EFL tests, ELT, feedback

I. INTRODUCTION

In Iran, English Language Teaching (ELT) formally started in the 1930s and received the first systematic syllabus in 1977. The programs for ELT were first organized nationally and then locally, and each city could design and manage its own ELT courses. Then, due to the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the textbooks and the educational system underwent a great change; therefore, there was an urgent need for renewing the ELT syllabuses (Vajargah, 1997). From the beginning, the study of a foreign language was perceived necessary and now more necessary due to the globalization, expansion of the information technologies, and requirements of global communication. This necessity demands all high schools to include the teaching of a foreign language in the syllabus, mainly English. The English language tests are recommended, prepared, implemented, and monitored by the Ministry of Education to place the development of competences at the heart of all educational projects and evaluation in the country.

According to Narafshan (2006), following the changes in the textbooks, syllabuses received changes by offering new theoretical approaches towards the issues relevant to the classroom practice, presenting new materials, introducing new techniques, and improving classroom skills. It should be mentioned that the new changes required the application of systematic English language tests in order to meet the need of the schools.

Due to the communicative language teaching (CLT) as assigned approach for the Iranian high schools by the Ministry of Education, various English language tests were designed to evaluate the grammatical aspects of the English language. The new tests seek to evaluate the communicative competence of the students, which means observing the use of the knowledge of foreign language to act in specific situations (Atai & Khaki, 2006). Thus, the tests should rely on “the distinction between different levels of competence where knowledge of the grammatical rules and semantic aspects of the language is meaningful” (Motes, et al. 2010). Theoretically, the English language tests set out to measure how the student can unconsciously use the rules of the language and understand the meanings expressed through the language in different contexts. For evaluative purposes, the tests rely on inventory of sub-competencies presented by Bachman (1990) that distinguishes between linguistic competence and pragmatic competence.

It is noticeable that the English language tests for all the students finishing high-school in Iran would evaluate sub-competencies (i.e. grammatical and textual competences). Grammatical competence implies mastering the linguistic code, that is, knowledge of vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling rules, word formation and function, sentence structures. According to Manjarres (2009), “Textual competence implies the identification of cohesive elements and the rhetoric organization of a text”. In textual competence, paradigmatic and semantic elements or meaning recognitions are

evident. Textual competence covers vaster areas such as “textual coherence, the ability to structure discourse, logical sequences of ideas, and construct meaning from a text” (ibid).

Because it is important to implement the English language tests in the educational system of Iran for their special effect, the following questions normally arise: Has the English language tests had any effects “on the teaching and learning of English? If so, what kind of effect? How are the tests reflected in the classroom?” (ibid). In the line of test effect on teaching and learning, the literature shows the significance of language testing and defines the property of the tests that concerns their effects on teaching and learning.

Since tests are considered as one of the integral features of the academic curriculum in Iran, whether such tests have had any impact on the teaching of English language in the country is an obvious question which attracts the figures involved in education. Such impact of the test on the teaching and learning is considered a very complex phenomenon known washback (Cheng, 2000 & Watanabe, 2004).

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Washback, according to Chen (2002) and Hughes (2003), is defined “the effect of tests on teaching and learning”. However, Cheng and Curtis (2004) make a clear distinction between washback and test impact. Test impact refers to the effect of a test on “individuals, policies, or practices within the classroom” (p. 4). Andrews, Fullilove, and Wong (2002) do not make that distinction and consider that “narrow and wider effects can be included under the term washback” (cited in Salehi et al. (2011)).

The concept of washback should be associated with validity. Cheng (2000) refers to washback validity to describe the “quality of the relationship between testing and teaching and learning” (p. 4). For Messick (1996), washback is “part of construct validity and an inherent quality of any kind of assessment, especially when the results are used for important decisions”. Accordingly, Salehi et al. (2011) stresses that “only valid tests which minimize construct irrelevancies can increase the possibility of positive washback”. Furthermore, Djuric (2008) supports in his detailed study when and if teachers narrow any aspect of the curriculum because of the tests, it results in negative washback. Positive washback, on the other hand, is said to result when a testing procedure encourages good teaching practice (Tylor, 2005).

In order to know how washback emerges, Manjarres (2009) mentions that “a number of variables in society, education, and schools” should be considered. They include variables relevant to the participants of the case such as teachers, students, material developers, and publishers, variables relevant to the process of learning like actions by participants towards learning, and variables relevant to the products like what is learned and the quality of learning (Hughes, 1993, as cited in Bailey, 1996).

Different scholars view washback differently due to the different results of the washback. Alderson and Wall (1993) show English language tests cause “faster changes in the content of teaching than changes in teaching methodology” (cited in (Manjarres, 2009)). Cheng (1997) accounts for washback that brings changes in teaching materials. Andrews et al. (2002) found out “washback seems to be associated primarily with “high-stakes” tests, that is, tests used for making important decisions” (cited in Manjarres, 2009). Cheng (2000) reports on how tests are often introduced into the education system to improve teaching and learning.

In general, various features have to be regarded to deepen the understanding of washback, such as the school environment, messages from administration, expectations of teachers, students’ needs, and objectives of learners and educational systems (Saif, 2000). In addition, Shohamy et al. (1996) consider other features like “the status of the subject-matter tested, the nature of the test, and the use to which the test scores are put”. Wall (1996) also lists other features ranging from teachers’ factors to more macrofactors like the gap between “designers of tests and teachers, lack of well-trained teachers, and the overload of teachers”. According to Andrews et al. (2002), motivation and the published materials should be added to the abovementioned list.

III. METHODOLOGY

Because the purpose of this study was to describe the washback effect of the English language tests on the teaching of English language in Esfahan high schools, the lessons and the components of the each lesson with the contents of each component in the textbooks of four levels which are taught in high schools of Iran were considered and reviewed. All books assigned to teach at four high school levels consist of the parts titled ‘new words, reading, grammar, write it down, language function, pronunciation practice’. Then, the final tests of June 2012 for each level were separately analysed to see the parts of the books which have been addressed. Thirty classrooms at all four levels in Education District 3 in the city of Esfahan were randomly selected and observed to see the parts of each lesson that are practically practiced in the classes. The teachers of the classes participated in this study and gave their feedback on teaching practice through a 20-item questionnaire. Another 20-item questionnaire was employed to collect the learners’ feedback on the teaching practice. Both questionnaires were in Likert scale (5-Strongly agree, 4-Agree, 3-Undecided, 2-Disagree, 1- Strongly disagree).

A. Participants

Thirty male English language teachers at level 1, 2, 3, and 4 were randomly selected from different high schools in the Education District 3 in the city of Esfahan. They all had more than four years of English teaching experience. They were observed as they were teaching and implementing various teaching techniques. They were then given a 20-item questionnaire to be filled up in terms of what they teach in the classroom. Thirty students from the observed classes were offered another 20-item questionnaire to collect their feedback on the teaching materials. In their answers, the teachers and students reflected general awareness of the instrumental benefits of teaching and the importance of the English language tests.

B. Processes

According to Manjarres (2009), “processes mean to material development, syllabus design, changes in teaching methodology, and testing strategies among others”. The syllabus of the course under study was textbook-driven, though sometimes the teachers would not follow the exact order or would choose to skip some of the activities outlined in the textbook. During the observations, the text-books were followed to trace teachers’ coverage of the lesson components. It is suggested by the curriculum experts (Farhadi et.al, 2009) that the books, which are built up to meet CLT-based requirements, should deal with both discrete-point schemes like quantifiers, vocabulary, grammar, guided writing and integrative-point schemes like dialogues, listening comprehension, reading, and composition.

However, dialogue practice, listening comprehension, and extensive writing were not dealt with in the observed classes. Among them, writings were assigned as homework before the topics were actually developed. The classroom observations also showed that from the many activities to be developed during the class time, some of them were directed towards the development of grammatical competence, such as gap-filling exercises, sentence construction, negative and question forms of the sentence, scanning, and translation of discrete items. Furthermore, there were few cloze exercises to fill in the appropriate quantifier and guided reading tasks where the students were asked to read paragraphs loudly and translate them identifying the present discourse markers.

Some productive class activities like oral presentations and dialogue practice for the enhancement of other competencies were not exploited because they turned out to be excluded in university entrance exams (UEE). Students just articulated them with non-native pronunciation and poor intonation. Understanding the oral presentations or dialogues was non-existent. In other cases, the presentations just included reading texts aloud that contained a number of mistakes. The students were, most of the time, practicing rules in artificial exercises that focused on form, usually at sentence level, with predictable responses. For grammar exercises, the correct answers were supplied and sometimes the repetition of the rule was considered if there were errors.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

Manjarres (2009) highlights an insight into the test to be obtained through an analysis of the official documents of the English language tests. Hence, the analysis of such documents available for the teachers and researchers in the Exam Office of Education District 3 in the city of Esfahan was carried out. They were set in June 2011 enclosing the general theoretical frames of the teaching of foreign languages in Esfahan. As Manjarres (2009) predicts, “special attention is given to the communicative competence while the distinction between grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competences is attended”. However, the concept of communicative competence was made operative through the notions of linguistic competence. On the other hand, only linguistic competence with its three sub-competencies—grammatical competence, textual competence, and textual coherence—is included in the obligatory tests that all the students have to take. The tests included multiple-choice questions, distributed in 10 different types of tasks or contexts of evaluation including different number of items for each task. The following table summarizes the types of tasks in the tests:

TABLE 1.
TYPES OF TASKS IN THE TESTS

No	Task	No of Items	Competence	Focus
1	Word definition	5	Grammatical	Structure
2	Word matching	10	Grammatical	Structure
3	Skimming	5	Textual	Comprehension
4	Scanning	10	Textual	Comprehension
5	Sentence structure	5	Grammatical	Structure
6	Verb tenses	5	Grammatical	Structure
7	Writing sentences	2	Textual	Comprehension
8	Discourse markers	3	Textual	Comprehension
9	Dialogue completion	3	Textual	Comprehension
10	Pronunciation practice	2	Textual	Comprehension

The nature of the tests was matched with the textbooks contents and the format of the tests was sequenced in accordance to the textbooks topics. “Word definition” items were to evaluate grammatical knowledge of parts of speech, whereas items aimed at “Word matching” evaluate correct structures. “Skimming” and “Scanning” items were to identify the level of the students’ reading comprehension in general and in parts. “Grammar recognition” part evaluated whether the students could distinguish the correct choice among multiple items (answer and distracters). “Verb tenses” items were assigned to check the students’ knowledge for proper forms of verbs and their applications in question and

negative sentences. In “Writing sentences” items, the students needed to bring the non-arranged parts of the sentences into rational order. It sometimes seems to be testing general logical abilities and one may feel like solving a puzzle, rather than be tested on actual knowledge of how to connect pieces of discourse or use discourse signals. “Discourse markers” in the form of cloze tests required the students to know the correct form of the appropriate words or the right preposition in a certain sentence. In some cases, “it also required understanding of relationships between adjacent sentences or clauses” (Salehi and Yunus, 2012). “The dialogue completion” task was not authentic since the test takers had to fill the blank of the missing chunks in order to get the answer right. This was never a requirement for using the language in real-life. Besides, sometimes more than one answer was possible. “Pronunciation practice” items tried to estimate the students’ capability to identify the correct pronunciation through phonetic transcriptions.

The observation process took a complete session for each class through which both researchers pursued the lesson coverage by teachers and those textbook parts skipped by teachers were marked on an observation checklist sheet. At the end of each session, a 20-item questionnaire prepared for the teachers to identify the textbook-based activities implemented in the classrooms was offered to mark the activities. In addition, another 20-item questionnaire arranged for the students was submitted to one of the students of each class to mark the textbook-based activities he had received in the classroom. The data from the information on the questionnaires were statistically analysed.

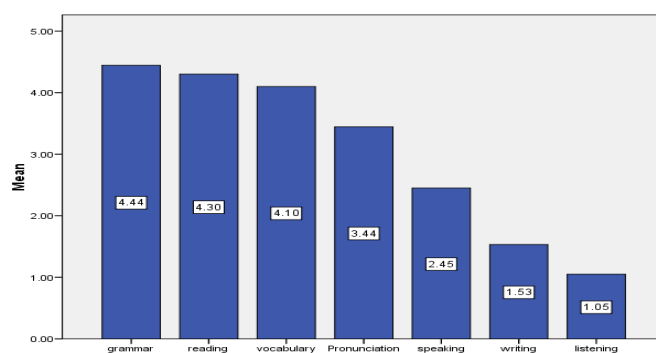
V. RESULT & DISCUSSION

The focus of English language teaching in high schools of Iran is the development of communicative competence. This focus is possible to be traced throughout the textbooks. Based on the textbooks focus, statistical analysis was made and findings indicated that both the teachers and the students work exclusively towards the development of linguistic competence in class. Table 2 shows textbook materials, the number of teachers expressing feedback, mean and standard deviation.

TABLE 2.
TEXTBOOK MATERIALS, NUMBER OF TEACHERS, MEAN, & STANDARD DEVIATION

Material	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std.Dev
Vocabulary	30	2.50	5.00	4.1000	.77013
Writing	30	1.00	4.00	1.5333	.71973
Reading	30	3.00	5.00	4.3000	.52777
Grammar	30	3.67	5.00	4.4444	.46595
Speaking	30	1.25	3.25	2.4500	.50600
Listening	30	1.00	2.00	1.0500	.20129
Pronunciation	30	2.00	5.00	3.4444	.94416

The mean for teacher participants’ feedback (Table 2 and Graph 1) indicates that maximum emphasis in English language classes in Iranian high schools is respectively placed on grammar, reading and vocabulary and the minimum on speaking, writing, and listening. The skill which is moderately paid attention to is pronunciation practice.



Graph 1: The mean of the textbooks materials from teachers’ feedback

The maximum and minimum focus on some teaching materials in the classes (Graph 1) is felt to justify the presence of the first group and the absence of the second group in UEE in Iran. Comparing Table 1 and Graph 1 show the justification of teaching some materials like grammar to the maximum and some others such as writing to the minimum and some receive no attention like listening.

TABLE3.
PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS FOR THE TEACHERS’ FEEDBACK ON TEXTBOOKS MATERIALS

	Mean	N	Std. Dev	Std. Error Mean
Exam	3.9833	30	.50507	.09221
Non-Exam	2.4500	30	.26316	.04805

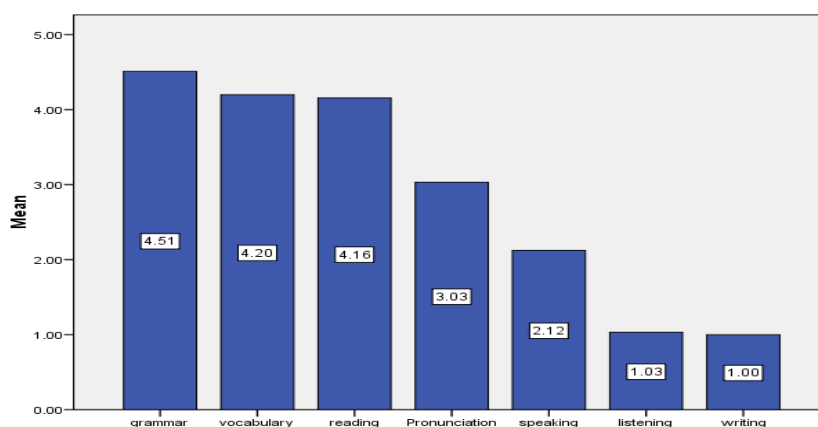
Table 3 shows mean difference for EFL teachers in Iranian high schools who teach those materials and skills that are presented in the tests. The mean for those materials and skills that are in the tests is (3.99) and for the materials that are absent in the test is (2.45) indicating the teachers' focus is on the materials that are included in the tests.

In order to consider the possible washback effect on the teaching of the teachers based on the materials of the textbooks, the analysis and findings of the collected data taken from the students' feedback are presented. Table 4 shows textbook materials, the number of students expressing their feedback, mean and standard deviation.

TABLE 4.
TEXTBOOK MATERIALS, NUMBER OF STUDENTS, MEAN, & STANDARD DEVIATION

Material	N	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev
Vocabulary	30	3.00	5.00	4.2000	.97025
Writing	30	1.00	1.00	1.0000	.00000
Reading	30	2.33	5.00	4.1556	.89157
Grammar	30	3.67	5.00	4.5111	.65351
Speaking	30	1.00	3.00	2.1250	.63229
Listening	30	1.00	2.00	1.0333	.18257
Pronunciation	30	1.00	5.00	3.0333	.24522

The mean for student participants' feedback (Table 4) is highly similar to the mean for teachers' participants. That is, that maximum emphasis in English language classes in Iranian high schools is respectively placed on grammar, vocabulary, and reading and the minimum on speaking, writing, and listening. That the teachers' participants show moderate attention to pronunciation practice in the classes is also confirmed by students.



Graph 2: The mean of the textbooks materials from students' feedback

The maximum and minimum focus on some teaching materials in the classes (Graph 2) represents the materials that are included in the tests. By comparing above-illustrated tables and graphs, it is understood that textbooks materials taught and emphasised in the classes are integrated in the tests.

TABLE 5.
PAIRED SAMPLES STATISTICS FOR THE STUDENTS' FEEDBACK ON TEXTBOOK MATERIALS

	N	Mean	Std. De	Std. Error Mean
Exam	30	3.8792	.59041	.10779
Non-Exam	30	2.1694	.36912	.06739

Table 5 shows mean difference of students' feedback in Iranian high schools that seem to learn language skills in the light of CLT method attending communicative competence for English language students. The mean (3.87) shows the taught materials are those materials and skills represented in the tests and the mean (2.16) shows the materials that are not included in the tests.

The central question of this study was whether the English language tests have had any washback effect on the teaching of English in the high school classes in Esfahan. The results of this study indicate that there is the effect of the English language tests in the context of teaching practices. Since it is possible to establish with certainty how was English taught and learnt in the context before the English language tests were introduced, it is obvious that the washback has naturally exerted effect on English language teaching. From the analyzed data, it is apparent to document certain trends to go in line with the tests, whereas the data cannot identify the presence of certain skills required for L2 learners such as listening, speaking, and writing. This absence of certain skills is highly due to the test as the teachers teach the materials assigned and considered in the final tests.

Manjarres (2009) defines the English language tests as “a step in a lengthy process of improving the quality of teaching in a country and as a measure to quantify the advances made by the students”. Moreover, the students take various tests in the school in order to score higher in the final exams of each school year as a short-term goal and university matriculation as a long-term goal. Besides, the textbooks introduce plenty of practice in linguistic competence, and due to the both pre-determined goals and tests-oriented curriculum assigned by the educational policy making figures, much of the formal classroom time is inherently dedicated to the linguistic competence and subsequently such competence is hugely tested in the tests.

The teachers and the students are well aware of the importance and the demands of the tests, and in a way, they admit that what they do is related to this challenge. The teachers feel they are evaluated through this, but the students seem to associate the tests with a wider general goal of knowing English. Consequently, it can be said that “the tests have contributed to strengthening the feedback of the importance of English inside the school” (Manjarres, 2009). Therefore, teachers and students should face the challenge over teaching and learning to deal with the tests or to use the tests to teach and learn English language. However, it could be argued that if there were no tests, the changes would hardly take place.

The washback effect of tests on teaching in four levels has shown to be negative because it seems to constrict teaching practices implemented in the classroom. For instance, the findings of this study indicate that the teachers’ decisions relevant to syllabus, activities, and evaluation are because of the tests in final examinations that cannot necessarily assure students of learning all required skills such as listening, speaking, and writing. The teacher-made decisions are unable to have the needs of the students met as outlined in their CLT-based textbooks but just prepare students for handling the final test requirements.

VI. CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

This study shows an overall negative washback effect of the English language tests on teaching materials. It also confirms the lack of general awareness of the importance of improving all required skills for students charted in CLT-based textbooks in high schools of Esfahan. Any teaching practice directed to ignoring or narrowing down the essential needs of students result in negative washback (Djuric, 2008). Listening, speaking, and writing that have not been taught or sounded trivial in the classes signify ignoring or narrowing down students’ necessary skills. Moreover, the communicative competence is reduced in the English language tests to two sub-competencies—grammatical competence and textual competence. The orientation of the classroom practices, including class tests, strongly correlate with the direction set by the tests. The scope of the tests and the objectives of the class is highly restricted because most of the time the students are asked to focus on linguistic features, and any activity that goes beyond this such as listening, writing, and speaking are seen as a waste of time. The students spend most of the time solving grammatical exercises from the book or the board and translating unknown words from Persian into English or vice versa.

It should be pointed out that in Iran schooling system; however, the lack of audio-oral facilities as a limitation of the teaching and testing cannot be overlooked. Accordingly, a lot of teaching, learning, and testing practices and activities in English classes in Iran are turned down. The lack of facilities brings about some constraints by which the negative washback would be exerted on the teaching practices. The negative washback, either due to the narrowing down any aspect of the curriculum by the teacher or lacking facilities, results in the students’ low level of linguistic competence, let alone communicative competence.

It is hoped that in upcoming school years, the educational authorities, according to Manjarres (2009), consider “the evaluation of pragmatic competence” in the tests, so that the teachers make a definite step towards focusing beyond linguistic forms into communicative interaction. It is also essential that the teachers get extensive professional development opportunities in relation to “what communicative competence is and how it can be developed and tested” (ibid). It is also hoped that more direct and authentic language and tasks are included in the tests to drive students to use the language and avoid them from just viewing the usage of language. In accordance with Manjarres (2009), in case of not driving students to listening, speaking or writing activities beyond recurring practices, they possibly ignore the significance of such skills.

It is worth analysing the needs of EFL in the Iranian context and subsequently finds the outlines for both teaching and testing to match the needs and have the students feel an actual need for language learning rather than considering the foreign language tests as a mere formality for finishing high school. Although the construction, administration, and evaluation of existing test for English language classes should be taken into consideration as “an initial step towards a long-term goal of raising the standards of communicative competence in the country” (Manjarres, 2009), there is no evidence available in this study showing that what is being taught and learnt is currently oriented to communicative competence. It is therefore made known that prepared tests in Iranian context are highly oriented to the linguistic competence and students accordingly are prepared for involving in limited number of tasks that are not fully productive in EFL context. The focus of the test tasks reveals that washback effects of tests change students to receivers of language inputs rather than language producers of language output. The students are just involved in comprehension and structure tasks which are qualitatively different from what is outlined in the textbooks, syllabus, and curriculum assigned by the ministry of Education of Iran. It is important, then, to keep track of future changes in the tests and of the

ways in which the schools and the teachers react to them in order to direct all interested individuals and in particular teachers and students to turn to active communicators instead of being mere receivers.

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