



RESEARCH PAPER

Investigating the Washback Effect of Examinations Phobia in EFL Learning Context: Students and Teachers' Perceptions

Usman Shah Toti*¹ Imran Khan² Arif Widaa Ali Mohamed³

1. Lecturer, Department of English, College of Education, Majmaah University, Majmaah Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, u.toti2002@mu.edu.sa
2. Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Education, Majmaah University, Majmaah, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
3. Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Education, Majmaah University, Majmaah, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

DOI

[http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2022\(6-III\)34](http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2022(6-III)34)

ABSTRACT

The effects of testing on students learning a foreign language have been the subject of substantial investigation in related literature. In practice, the majority of teachers evaluate their students through scheduled tests that they hold following the semester's initial syllabuses. This qualitative study investigated the importance of the washback effect (negative and positive) of examinations on Saudi EFL undergraduates at Majmaah University considering their perceptions related to learning, teaching methodology, and course contents. The study adopts a qualitative approach conducting interviews to collect data from teachers and students. The qualitative data was analyzed through thematic analysis. The washback effect was interpreted about issues such as teaching methodology, learning, and contents of the course. The results indicated that learners' fear of examination level increased and their performance decreased when they were aware of the assessment in terms of lack of background knowledge, grammar and syntax, course content, and teaching methodology. The pedagogical implications were related to authentic activities, formative assessment, and language skills.

Keywords

Course Content, English As a Foreign Language, Teaching Methodology, Testing, Washback Effect

Introduction

The importance of language testing in the learning environment cannot be overstated. The most essential concerns in the English learning process are language assessment and language instruction, both of which are correlative. Language testing is used to evaluate language instruction and student achievement. Language testing includes washback effects that can affect the learning process in both positive and negative ways. Hughes (2003) stated that testing is very important because it provides data about the language abilities, achievements, and proficiency of each individual. Testing is a tool to measure the learners' abilities and to make a comparison in their achievements. Assessment too shows the impact on teachers' teaching methodologies and their contents. Hence, teachers and students should organize their tasks according to the tests to develop their critical standards and evaluate their listening tests (Buck, 1988). The effects of tests in EFL classrooms are very important. Washback if positive or negative can be proven significant to teaching and syllabus because washback effects can provide the right direction to teaching and curriculum in terms of the contents of the course. Assessment, according to McNamara (2000), is critical

to the learning process. According to him, performance evaluations require integrated material and abilities that have a beneficial washback impact.

Washback Effect

Effects of language testing on instruction and learning are referred to as washback or backwash (Alderson & Wall, 1993). In the context of education, washback refers to the impact of testing on teaching and learning. Tests are strong and powerful factors that can affect teaching and learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993). The term 'washback,' commonly known as 'backwash,' refers to the impact of an assessment or testing on learning and teaching (Cheng & Curtis, 2004). Hughes (2003) states that washback is the connection of underlying testing and having to learn. However, Alderson & Wall (1993) define "washback" as "classroom behaviors of instructors and learners rather than the nature of printed and other pedagogical material." They also consider washback to be one that teachers and students "wouldn't certainly do otherwise." According to Palmer and Bachmann (1996, p.35), washback is a very complicated dimension that affects teaching and learning. They say that the influence of tests should be considered in the contextual framework, goals of society, beliefs, and values in which the tests are conducted. According to Bailey (1996), the effects of learners and programs are different. Tests can be used to assess a learner's abilities and achievements concerning the curriculum, teaching methods, textbooks, and goals.

Different Types of Washback

Washback can be perceived in two ways, according to Hughes (1989): positively or negatively. According to the survey investigated by Bailey (1996), positive washback affects learning outcomes, test validity, learners' autonomy, and self-assessment and test feedback. On the other hand, negative washback takes place when the content and format of the test don't match the language abilities of the learners. Therefore, reading and writing skills are assessed by multiple-choice questions. Great emphasis is given to the practice of these items rather than to practicing reading and writing skills (Davies et al., 1999). (Cheng & Watanabe, 2004) Cheng et al. (2004) have categorized washback effects into a) weak washback and b) strong washback which are also called "overt and "covert". These explain the use of exams and examples from the textbooks which examine skills in the exam and consequently may affect teachers' attitudes towards the tests.

Literature Reviews

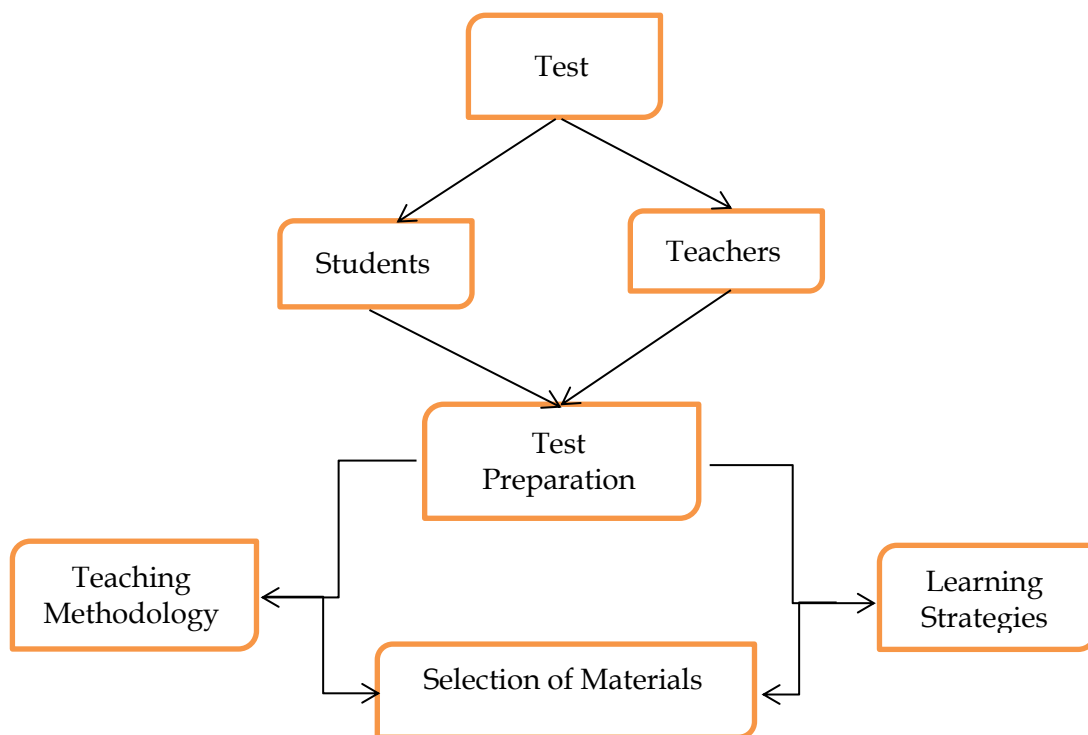
Several researchers looked into and analyzed how washback can influence stakeholders. A research study conducted by Cheng (1997) on secondary school examinations in Hong Kong, investigated the effect both at the macro-level and micro-level. Macro-level stakeholders such as examination authorities, textbooks publishers, and various institutions while the micro-level emphasis on teachers' attitudes, contents of teaching, and classroom interactions. Her research survey was broad scale including her observations of 45 lessons, 12 teachers, 550 questionnaires, and 1700 learners and interviews. The teachers were satisfied with the examinations that promoted the learners' English based on tasks. The teaching methodology remained unchanged. Likewise, to investigate the washback effect of a high-stakes test on the teaching and learning process, Tsagari (2007) interviewed 15 native and non-native EFL teachers who were actively participating in teaching. The findings triggered a comprehensive review of the textbook materials using a custom-built device. The examination had an impact on the materials used by the instructors while

teaching. However, there was no indication of any washback effects on the teachers' teaching skills, according to the data analysis. The content focused on skills development as the pre-requisite for the examination. On the other hand, when an exam is approaching, nervousness, self-doubt, and the passionate optimism that you will survive it nearly always go hand in hand (Brown, 2000). According to a 2003 study by Smith and Racine, oral communication, writing, and reading in the target language all produce foreign language anxiety. In other words, test anxiety impairs one's ability to communicate verbally and in writing. Hence, test anxiety is a crucial factor that influences the learning process, according to the findings of earlier studies that examined the association between test anxiety and learning a foreign or second language (Aydin, 2009).

Similarly, Green (2007) researched IELTS prep courses to determine whether they contributed to higher writing test scores. Before and after their courses, participants were required to complete a pre-test and a post-test. To gather information about the participants' backgrounds, motivations, participation in class activities, and usage of learning strategies, questionnaires were used. The results showed that test-driven education does not always result in higher student scores, suggesting that "teaching to the test" is not more effective at raising test scores than teaching the desired skills. The study's findings revealed that teachers' instruction is unaffected by changes in classroom content. As a result, it is critical to examine the examination system at the college level to discover and address the strengths and shortcomings in the teaching approach, course syllabus, content, and context-related aspects.

Conceptual Model of Washback

The following figure shows the engagement of various techniques used in conducting a washback assessment.



The figure above shows a relationship between the variables that could result in an improved assessment.

Material and Methods

The present study aims to show the importance and perceptions of the washback effect of examinations on Saudi EFL learners and teachers at Majmaah University. The paradigm for this research study is a constructivist model. This survey is purely qualitative in the data collection method. According to Bailey (1996), the washback effect as a world phenomenon cannot be accessed for measurement. According to constructivist theory, learning is possible on the contextual phenomenon and human experiences which is a socially constructed reality. The researcher is interested in the role played by the context and the learner's perceptions of washback. The sample was randomly taken heterogeneously including 5 undergraduate students from the College of Education and 5 undergraduate students from the Community College and 5 professional, competent teachers from the community college, and 5 from the College of Education at the same university. The teaching staff included professors, associate professors, and lecturers who were professionals in their teaching fields. All the participants who were selected for the interviews were male. The survey did not rely on gender differences. I selected the cluster sampling technique for this study which was more appropriate. The research was based on semi-structured interviews important tools for collecting data. These tools seemed to be more motivating for the respondents. Both interviews aimed to collect more information, ideas, and views about the washback effect. In addition, the format of interviews and questionnaires was more helpful for the researcher. The researcher felt free to spend time and explore more views to satisfy the data. The study was particular to Majmaah University just because of pedagogical restrictions. However, the research attempted to investigate the various factors related to washback. The outcomes of this study can be applied in more dynamic ways to different places to assist institutions.

Data Analysis

The data was collected from semi-structured interviews including experts, professional teachers, and students. The results of the study were analyzed and interpreted, and it was determined that the examinations had negative washback from the two different colleges at Majmaah University. The respondents' perceptions and observations regarding exams were analyzed and interpreted using thematic coding. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with faculty members as well as with the undergraduate students which were on-the-spot transcribed for quick memorization and were given thematic coding concentrated on the content. The researcher conducted individual interviews and collected their professional opinions on washback effects, which are as follows:

Teachers' Opinions

Respondent 1

The first respondent argued that examinations are directly influenced by the assessment procedures because most of the learners focused on rigid exam systems just to increase scores. He further explained that high stake exams can affect teaching, and learning. The respondent further stated that having high stakes impacts their teaching methods as they concentrate on examination-related activities to help students score better, but research indicates that such methods may increase test scores without necessarily increasing understanding (Noble and Smith, 1994).

Respondent 2

The second respondent viewed that examinations could restrict the learners only to the contents, activities, and course syllabus without the existence of communicative activities to help them to show high performance. According to Lyons (1998), conflict begins between ethical and pedagogical issues when tests go contrary to the language learning practices and approaches. According to Bailey (1996), examination-related activities are very significant for the learners to get a high score.

Respondent 3

The third participant explored that listening and speaking skills play key roles in developing other skills like writing and reading which most teachers do not focus on. He argued that teachers just prepare these learners for the examinations only to get high scores rather than to focus on learning ability skills. He further argued that the use of multiple tasks should be increased to give students more chances to demonstrate the breadth of their knowledge and increase the reliability of the evaluation process. He said that indirect testing is used in the exam to assess students' language proficiency (as noted by Raza, 2009). He stated that there is a shaky and ambiguous correlation between performance on indirect tests and performance on the abilities in question.

Respondent 4

He explained the reasons for the negative effects of exams on learners in more detail. He stated that the main reasons are learners' natural mood; demonization and inappropriate tools to measure their skills and the learning outcomes properly. He further explained that the nature of exams, based on memorization and teaching methodology, and rote learning, don't reflect the truly critical and analytical skills of the learners. He further explained that multiple-choice objective questions assessment also affects the learners understanding negatively. Because all the learners are restricted to the course contents only that can lower their skills.

Students' Opinions

The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with the randomly chosen college of education and community college students to better understand their opinions and impressions about the detrimental effects of reading and writing exams on students. They concurred that a variety of factors, including the form of exams, teaching methods, and students' lack of background knowledge, may have a detrimental effect on learning.

Respondent 1

The first respondent explained his point of view saying that learners' linguistic knowledge, teaching methodology, exam pattern, resources, and materials of teaching are thought to be hurdles in answer to the questions. He further stated that learning strategies awareness, communicative rapport, as well as background knowledge are the factors that have a direct impact on the exams. He said that it was difficult to reflect on his experiences with tests due to a lack of linguistic and content knowledge.

Respondent 2

The second respondent argued that the tests are difficult and the students find them hard to understand the questions. Many students fail to answer due to test anxiety which is primarily brought on by a lack of word knowledge, a lack of grammar and syntax knowledge, a fear of failing, a worry of receiving a poor grade, anxiousness, and a time constraint. Second, the fear of failing a class, the worry of doing poorly in front of classmates, the fear of making mistakes, and the fear of using incorrect terms are all factors of language anxiety.

Respondent 3

The third respondent expressed his opinion arguing that when teachers don't mention the assessment, language learners are less anxious and uncomfortable. In other words, if teachers do not inform EFL students that it is an assessment, they won't feel worried and eager. He further stated that worries were mostly related to the teachers when they mentioned the date and time for the exam.

Respondent 4

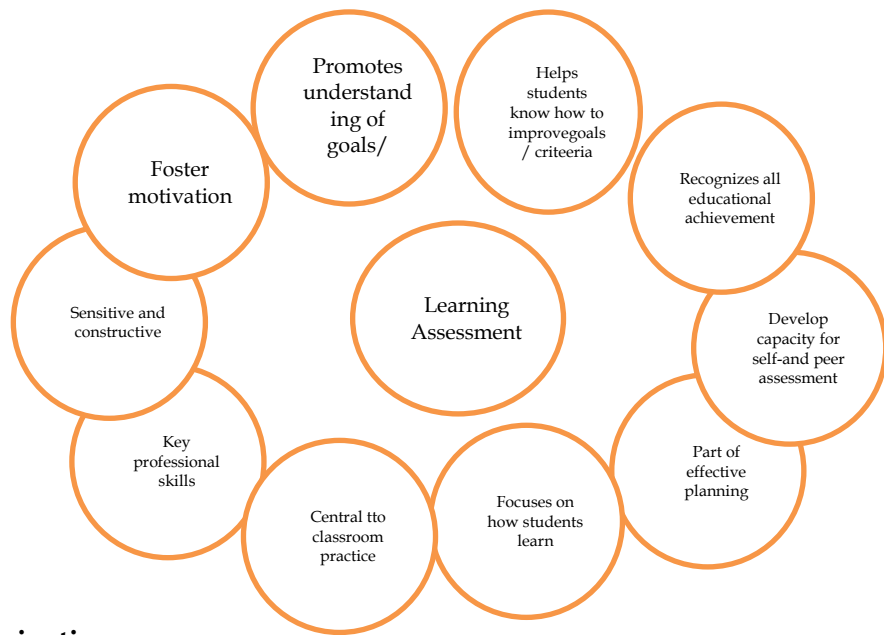
Future research may potentially examine the relationships between testing anxiety and other characteristics such as learner disability, gender, and performance on tests, which indicate the negative consequences of testing on students' performance and learning.

Summary

The majority of the interviewees (teachers) argued that they instructed the students to follow what will be asked of them on the exam. They aimed to help their students succeed in completing the performance test task. The performance test's needed task was then shown in class so that the students could acquire a feel for how the exam should be completed. The respondents claim that the difficulties that produced barriers influencing their academic performance were the exam's content, the teaching approach, and the question patterns. In this situation, the curriculum may be made simpler since the lesson is tailored to the test's requirements.

Learning Assessment

According to Gipps (1996), assessment aims to improve the learning process and teaching methodology. Learning that takes place in an educational context can develop students' ability to understand and explain its application in different contexts (Harlen and James, 1997). Black and William (1998) state that formative assessment can change learning and teaching in a context. Both formative and summative assessments are necessary for enhancing students' performances because there exists a feedback from the examinations being assessed. The following graph illustrates how learning is evaluated in relation to students' performance.

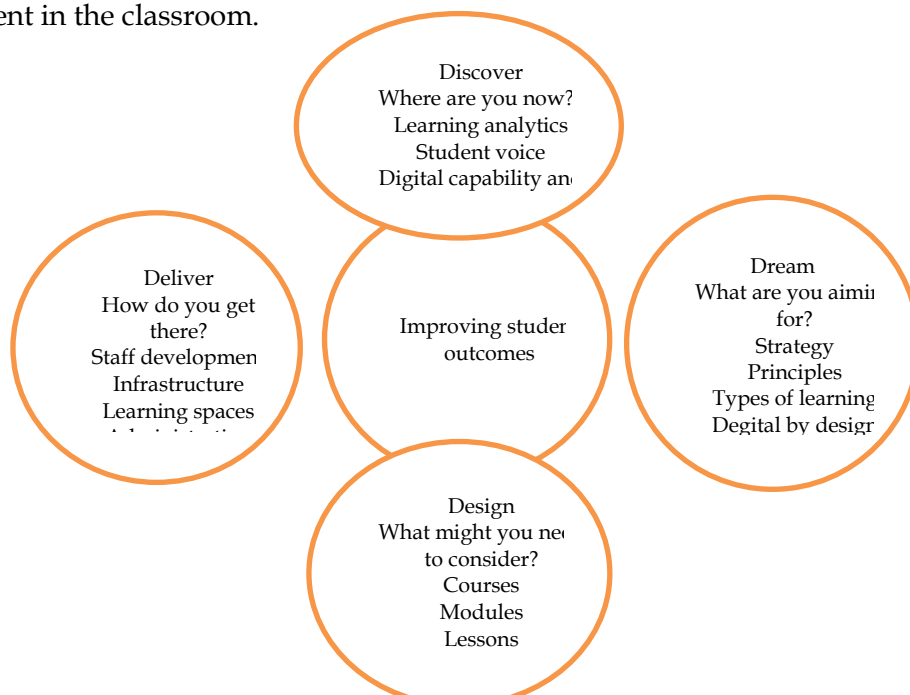


Content of Examination

The college follows a regular syllabus-planned program with textbooks in which the students are examined through testing. However, the exams are limited to a few skills of the students. The students are not equipped with accurate skills to be reflected in the examinations because these goals are curricular oriented not content based.

Assessment of Achievement and Tasks Assessment

The constructivist model is used to assess learners’ achievement. According to Gipps (1996), achievement assessment is used to measure a student’s ability to solve problems under specific activities. Some researchers state that high-stake exams will work better if deal with psychology. Learning will be better through assessment if tasks are integrated in a well-organized way which will have positive washback repercussions. The following figure shows the details about learning assessment in the classroom.



Conclusion

This research study was investigated to explore the washback negative effects of examinations from the learner's and teachers' perspectives. The findings of this study collected from the interviews indicated that the majority of the respondents believed that without the presence of communication activities to aid them in demonstrating excellent performance, tests could limit students to just the contents, activities, and course syllabus. Since most students concentrated on rigid exam systems to improve their results and argued that assessments had a direct impact on exams. Few of the respondents explained their point of view saying how difficult tests might reflect instruction and learning. Hence, high-stakes exams can boost scores but can also decrease comprehension capacity, according to Noble and Smith (1994). The findings obtained from this study showed that EFL learners' experience of the test is aroused by several factors such as lack of course content, lack of world knowledge, insufficient grammar and syntax knowledge, fear of failure in the exam, traditional teaching, and fear of making mistakes. There is a dire need to conduct more empirical studies in the Saudi EFL learning context to discover the washback effects of the examinations on learning outcomes, teaching methodology, and content of the courses. Future research may potentially examine the relationships between testing anxiety and other characteristics such as learner disability, gender, and performance on tests, which indicate the negative consequences of testing on students' performance and learning. This research survey comprises a heterogeneous, randomized small-scale sampling of subjects, a limited number of teachers, and students. However, future studies can be broadened and based on large samplings. The data obtained from this study will be helpful to be utilized in other countries to promote the learning assessment exams mechanisms in a different context.

Reference

- Alderson, J. C., & Wall, D. (1993). Does washback exist? *Applied Linguistics*, 14(2), 115-129.
- Aydin, S. (2009). Test anxiety among foreign language learners: A review of literature. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 5(1).
- Brown, J. D. (2000). University entrance examinations: Strategies for creating positive washback on English language teaching in Japan. *Shiken: JALT Testing & Evaluation SIG Newsletter*, 3(2).
- Buck, G. (1988). Testing listening comprehension in Japanese university entrance examinations. *JALT Journal*, 10(1), 15-42.
- Cheng, L. (1997). How does washback influence teaching? Implications for Hong Kong. *Language and Education*, 11(1), 38-54.
- Cheng, L., & Curtis, A. (2004). *Washback or backwash: A review of the impact of testing on teaching and learning*. Routledge.
- Cheng, L., & Watanabe, Y. (2004). *Washback in language testing: Research contexts and methods*. Routledge.
- Davies, A., Brown, A., Elder, C., Hill, K., Lumley, T., & McNamara, T. (1999). *Dictionary of language testing* (Vol. 7). Cambridge University Press.
- Hughes, A. (2003). *Testing for language teachers*. Cambridge university press.
- McNamara, T. (2000). *Language testing*. Oxford University Press.
- Raza, W. (2009). English language testing in higher education of Pakistan. *Market Forces*, 4(4).