

What Drives High School English Teachers to Teach the Way They do? An Investigation of the Washback Effect of the University Entrance Examination in Iran

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Abstract

It has often been argued that the university entrance examination (UEE) in Iran dominates the whole educational process in high schools, including the practice of EFL and washback effect of the test has been considered to be a negative one. However, these arguments have not been the subject of empirical research. Therefore, this study aimed to shed light on the matter with reference to high school English teachers. For this purpose, ten English classrooms were observed for two sessions to get insights into what really happens in the classrooms, and how teachers are affected by the UEE. Besides, in order to delve into the teachers' beliefs behind the token approaches in teaching, thirteen teachers were interviewed. Classroom observations proved grammar-translation method to be the dominant methodology in all classrooms. Interview with teachers also suggested UEE as one of the driving forces behind what teachers do in their language classrooms. However, further studies, including more teachers and longitudinal observations of their classrooms, are suggested.

Keywords: washback, teaching methodology, high-stakes test

INTRODUCTION

Language testing has been considered as central to language teaching. It provides goals for language teaching, and it monitors, for both teachers and learners, success in reaching those goals (Davies, 1990). Davies adds that testing can serve as a methodology for experiment and investigation in both language teaching and language learning/acquisition. Bachman (1990) also points out that tests are not developed and used without value. They are intended to serve the needs of an educational system of society at large. It is also stated that tests influence the way teaching and learning is done (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Backman, 1990; Backman & Palmer, 1996; Bailey,

1996/1999; Brown, 2000; Wall & Harrok, 2006; Watanabe, 1996). This effect of tests on teaching is referred to as the “washback” effect. Madaus (1988, cited in Andrew, 2004, p.38) expressed the assumption 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”. And, as McEwen (1995a, cited in Cheng & Curtis, 2004, p.3) stated, “what is assessed becomes what is valued, which becomes what is taught”.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers have been the most frequent case of studies on washback. Several studies have focused on teacher perspectives concerning tests, such as those by Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996), Burrows (2004), Cheng (2004), Muñoz and Álvarez (2009), Pizarro (2010), Qian (2014), Saif (2006), Valazza (2008), Wall and Horak (2006, 2008), Watanabe (1996, 2004), and Yin (2010).

On the washback effect of tests on teachers, Bailey (1999, p.17) stated that “the most visible participants in washback program are teachers. It is they who are the ‘front-line’ conduits for the washback processes related to instruction.” The importance of this effect is highlighted through seven statements in Alderson and Wall's (1993, pp. 120-121) hypothesis:

- A test will influence teaching.
- A test will influence what teachers teach.
- A test will influence how teachers teach.
- A test will influence the rate and sequence of teaching.
- A test will influence the degree and depth of teaching.
- A test will influence attitudes to the content, method, etc. of teaching and learning.
- A test will have washback effects for some learners and some teachers, but not for others.

Gipps (1994) quoted Frederikson (1984) who argued that a test is likely to influence the behavior of the students and teachers, provided that they know about it in advance, because both students and teachers want to do well on the test. Therefore, a great deal of time and effort will be spent on learning and teaching what the test measures and therefore, the effort to learn and practice whatever is not measured by the test decreases. Hughes (1994) also asserted that when a new test or a new syllabus or textbook is introduced, teachers try to prepare their students for the tasks which would be expected of the students at the end of the course. Swain (1985, cited in Bailey, 1999, p.18) also stated that “it has frequently been noted that teachers will teach to a test: that is if they know the content of a test and/or the format of a test, they will teach their students accordingly”. Spratt's (2005) study also showed that teachers play a crucial role in determining types and intensity of washback. She further emphasized that teachers can be powerful agents for promoting positive washback.

According to Gipps (1994), an accepted fact about testing, especially high-stakes testing, is that it has powerful effects on the way that construe the nature of their tasks. Smith (1991a, cited in Gipps, 1994) also pointed out that if teachers become too controlled by high-stakes tests, in terms of what they teach and how they teach, they will lose their ability to teach other untested aspects and other methods. Based on Alderson and Hamp-Lyons's (1996) study on the effects of TOEFL, the test "affected both what and how teachers taught, but the effect was not the same in degree or in kind from teacher to teacher. Choi's (2008) overview of the impact of standardized EFL tests on EFL education in Korea also showed that the test put too much pressure on preparation for the test. Most participants expressed their negative attitudes toward the test, believing that there is kind of mismatch between the test scores and English proficiency. Likewise, Yin's (2010) study reported the strong effect of Chinese National Matriculation English Test and the College English Test on Language teaching. Pizarro (2010) also found that teachers seemed to spend most of their class time working on the skills featured in the ET and neglecting untested skills and material. Similar effect are reported in Xie and Andrew's (2013) study in which higher expectations of test success led to greater engagement in test preparation and knowledge of the test triggered more practice of test-taking skills.

However, Alderson (2004) believed that although it is clear that washback is brought about by people in the classroom, not by test developers, there is so much that test developers can do to influence how people might prepare students for their tests. He further claimed that much more attention needs to be paid to the reasons why teachers teach the way they do, more study should be conducted to understand their beliefs about teaching and learning, the degree of their professionalism, the adequacy of their training and of their understanding of the nature of and rationale for the test and to see whether tests can be responsible for the way in which some teachers teach towards it. Likewise, according to Cheng and Curtis (2004), tests have often been criticized for their negative effects on teaching. However, they went on to say that "it is possible that research into washback may benefit from turning its attention toward looking at the complex causes of such a phenomenon in teaching and learning, rather than focusing on deciding whether or not the effects can be positive or negative." (p.11)

THIS STUDY

As mentioned before, it is now widely accepted that tests especially public examinations influence the attitudes, behaviors, and motivation of teachers, and particularly in the case of inexperienced teachers they can lead to teacher-centered lessons where they are not the final stage of a process of learning but dominate the whole process. One example of this is the way the University Entrance Examination (UEE) - as a high-stakes test- has affected language teaching and learning in Iranian high schools. There is too much competition to enter universities because in Iran high rank universities guarantee better job opportunities after graduation. To help students succeed at the exam, so many private institutions and extracurricular classes referred to as "UEE Preparation

Courses" have been set up. In the case of teaching English, the setting is almost traditional (structure-based syllabus and teacher-centered classrooms). The textbooks have been in use for years and little, if any, changes have been done about them. Students spend several years studying English in high schools with no significant achievement in the ability to speak English and teachers are involved in a competitive cycle just to cover the syllabus and make students ready for the competition. It is often argued that high school teachers are forced to practice English in classrooms in such a way as to meet the demands of the UEE. However these claims have not been tested empirically.

Therefore, this research was conducted in order to delve into the matter from the perspective of teachers to understand how English teaching process is affected by the UEE. To achieve this purpose, the following questions were put forth:

- Does the UEE in Iran affect high school English teachers' methodology use and classroom practices? If yes, is it a positive or a negative effect? Is it a covert or an overt effect?
- Is the level at which teaching is being done influential on the washback effect of the UEE in high school English classrooms?
- Do high school English teachers have a negative attitude toward the way English is being taught and tested in high schools?

METHOD

Participants

For classroom observations, ten teachers were selected from five high schools. In addition to these ten teachers, three more teachers agreed to take part in the interviews.

Instruments

In this research, two data collection instruments were taken into account to complement each other.

Observation

In order to get detailed information on what really happens in the classrooms and how much teachers are affected by the UEE, classroom events were recorded and analyzed using part A of communicative Orientation of Language Teaching Observation Scheme (COLT).

Interview

Teacher interviews were conducted in order to delve into teachers' beliefs and their rationale for implementing special activities in their classrooms. The areas investigated through the interviews were based on Wall and Horak's (2006) study.

Procedure

The classroom events were recorded and later on analyzed using Part A of COLT Observation Scheme. Part A details the activities and episodes that occur during the lesson, including the time taken for each activity. There were twenty observation sessions in total, involving ten teachers. Classes were observed during February to April. Each class was observed for 2 subsequent sessions. The rationale for observing each class for two subsequent sessions was that it was predicted by the researchers that in one session just one or two aspects might be practiced. Therefore, the subsequent observation session also seemed necessary in order to get a better understanding of how different aspects/skills were taught and practiced. The start time of each activity was recorded. The duration of each activity was later calculated as the percentage of the total class time (the length of the lesson minus breaks). Teacher interviews were conducted in first language because it was predicted that teachers might not have an adequate command of speaking ability.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were carried out in order to explore the teaching practice of the teachers involved in the sample not only in terms of what was being taught (i.e. the content) but also in terms of how it was being taught (i.e. the methodology). As noted earlier, the COLT (part A) observation scheme was used to collect data. Of particular importance in this phase was the extent to which the UEE might influence teaching methodology. Therefore, the result of this part was concerned particularly with the fourth of Alderson and Wall's (1993) hypotheses, i.e. that a test will influence how teachers teach. All recorded figures represent the total percentage of class time spent on each category of the COLT scheme including the features of participant organization, content, content control, student modality, and materials.

Participant Organization

As table 1 shows, within the first feature (i.e. participant organization), for the majority of class time, all teachers were engaged in whole-class work with the teachers leading the activity. Thus, it can be concluded that in terms of participant organization, the teacher-centered classroom -which allows teachers to implement grammar-translation method to the greatest effect- was prevalent through all classes. Indeed there was little, if any, opportunity for students to interact with each other. In addition, no instance of student-led activity was observed.

Table 1. Participant organization in the classes observed

Participant Organization	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10
T<->S/C	82.20	73.25	67.32	74.35	72.09	59.20	74.35	89.20	76.55	64.00
S<->S/C	0.00	0.00	08.20	0.00	0.00	09.52	02.25	0.00	0.00	0.00

coral & T<->S/C	10.80	24.00	21.40	2.50	16.80	21.18	24.40	11.80	21.00	19.50
Group	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	03.10	0.00	0.00	0.00	07.33
individual	08.00	03.75	04.08	06.15	11.11	08.00	0.00	0.00	03.45	10.27

Content

The next feature of the COLT scheme is content, which is employed to determine the extent to which a lesson focuses on meaning or form (Spada & Frohlich, 1995, cited in Caine, 2005). In the case of all teachers, the focus of instruction was on form (see table 2). The dominant language used in all classes was Persian and this involved giving procedural instruction, translating sentences into L1, explaining grammar, clarifying the meaning of the new words, and in the case of some teachers, even initial and final greeting.

Table 2. Representation of the content practiced in the classroom

Content	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10
Procedure	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Form	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Function	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Discourse	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Sociolinguistics	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Content Control

In the case of content control (see table 3), a figure of 100% under the category of teacher/text indicates that learners played no role in choosing texts or tasks. However, in this regard, even teachers seemed to have no choice on the selection of texts. All teachers seemed to follow the course book very closely. No teacher seemed to use any supplementary materials. They only decided on the order in which they presented the lesson.

Table 3. Representation of content control in the classrooms

Content control	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10
Tr/text	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
Tr/text/St	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Tr=teacher St=student

Student Modality

The next feature, student modality, also indicated that a non-communicative approach was the dominant methodology in all classes. The amount of time spent on each skill is illustrated in table 4. As the table shows no teacher allocated any time on practicing speaking and listening directly. Another feature of the classes observed was the absence of writing practice which is usually practiced in the form of essay writing in grammar-translation-oriented classes. This can be an indication of the UEE influence because in this test, test-takers are not tested on writing skill.

Table 4. Representation of the student modality in the classrooms

Student modality	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10
listening	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Listening & reading	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Listening & writing	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
speaking	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Reading	45.00	35.50	25.00	22.50	50.00	60.00	35.50	55.00	32.00	10.00
Reading & writing	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	18.35	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
writing	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

Material

The last feature in the COLT scheme is material. Both instances of extended and minimal texts were observed in these classes (see table 5). However, in most of the classes the dominant form was minimal text in the form of practicing separate sentences. The extended texts practices were just the reading passages of the textbook. No instances of audio or visual texts were observed.

Table 5. Representation of the material used in the classroom

Material	T1	T2	T3	T4	T5	T6	T7	T8	T9	T10
Minimal text	55.00	70.00	75.00	81.50	50.00	45.00	65.00	50.00	68.00	90.00
Extended text	45.00	30.00	25.00	18.50	50.00	55.00	35.00	50.00	32.00	10.00
Audio	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Visual	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
L2-NNS	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00
L2-N2	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Student-made	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00

L2-NNS = second language/non-native speaker

L2-NS = Second language/native speaker

Therefore, based on the analysis of the COLT scheme, little difference was observed among the teachers in terms of how English was taught.

Analysis of the observations

As was clear in the data obtained, grammar-translation method seemed to be the dominant methodology in all classes. The lessons of all teachers were characterized by focus on formal aspects of English, and reliance on traditional methods. There seemed to be no significant varying effects depending on the teachers involved. No difference was observed regarding who had control of the lesson. In all classes, the teacher seemed to be the predominant focus of the classes. In terms of content, the main focus in all classes was on form –teaching grammar in combination with vocabulary and practicing reading texts.

However, the COLT Scheme did not include one category that seemed to be of importance in this study- the extent to which teachers referred to the UEE test, (e.g. by providing the students with factual information about the test; giving them advice on test-taking strategies; or practicing past exam papers in the classroom). In the sessions observed, just three instances of "overt" washback effect of the UEE were identified in two classes. Here the interesting point is that these two classes were at pre-university level. Therefore, it might be concluded that UEE may have different amounts of effect at different levels and this amount is probably more at pre-university level at the end of which learners take the UEE. Of course not many obvious instances of the UEE effect were observed in other classes, but all the aspects practiced in the classrooms were limited to grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension practice which are the only elements/aspects tested in the UEE. Therefore, it can be inferred that the "covert" washback effects or the "implicit consequences" of a test which makes the class in conflict with the teacher's desire to teach communicatively and which leads the teacher to teach to the test exist in these high school English classes.

However, here the important question to ask is what drives all these teachers to follow the same methodology. Is it really the UEE responsible for this or are there other forces such as textbook, teacher training, etc, at work? To make the issue clear, interviews, whose analysis is provided in the following section, were conducted.

Teacher Interviews

Interviews gave teachers opportunities to describe the kind of activities they implemented, the techniques they employed, the linguistic aspects they focused on, the materials they used, and their rationale behind their choices.

Teacher's training and support

The aim of this section was to explore how much support is provided to the teachers by the educational system and how much teachers themselves are concerned about their professional development. The results suggested that teachers are not involved in developing their professional skills, neither are they supported by efficient pre-service or in-service trainings. Teachers are not familiar with different teaching methods and it seems that traditional methods are the only ones employed by teachers .

High School English Classes: Aims

This section aimed to explore teachers' awareness of the aim of teaching English in high-schools. Three possible aims were presented by the interviewer to the teachers and they were asked to show their agreement with the possible option/s. The three options presented were:

- Working on the right thing for passing the UEE,
- Improving the students' general English; and
- Enabling students to speak in English.

All of the teachers chose the first option (working on the right thing for passing the UEE) and four teachers also chose the second option, i.e. improving the learners' general English. The following question explored teachers' feeling about this aim. Except two teachers (T2, T9) who believed that entering university is too important and high schools should do their best to help students achieve this goal, the other teachers stated that they were dissatisfied with this objective. Here is what one teacher stated:

It is not good at all... today in almost all countries, schools aim at helping learners learn how to speak English. But it is not the case in Iran. We should just prepare students for the UEE for which knowing grammar and vocabulary is enough...

Therefore, it seems that although these teachers set their goal to prepare students for the UEE, they are dissatisfied with what this high-stakes test imposes on them and the way they have to teach .

High-School English Classes: Methodology

This section, which concerned the teachers' approach toward teaching as well as their views on the application of special activities, comprised of 17 questions. . Besides UEE, they referred to textbooks and schools' and parents' expectation as the other driving forces behind what they do in their classrooms

High-school English Classes: Assessment and Test-taking Techniques

This section, comprising 4 questions, aimed mainly to explore the extent to which testing and assessment in these high-school English classes were UEE-oriented. All teachers stated that the skills tested are usually those tested in the UEE (reading comprehension, grammar, and vocabulary) but not necessarily of the same format. Sometimes they may give open-ended questions, too. However, six teachers, who were also teaching at pre-university, stated they often gave tests based on the UEE format in order to make students familiar with the test. The last question in this section asked if teachers practiced past UEE papers in their classes. Five teachers –including three teachers who taught at pre-university level– seemed to do so. Hence, it can be concluded that teachers' teaching practice and assessment is more influenced by the test content rather than the test format. However, it seems that the effect seems to be higher at pre-university level – the year at which students take UEE test .

UEE-Awareness

This section aimed at discovering the extent to which teachers were aware of the format of the UEE test. Most of the teachers seemed to have an understanding of what was being assessed in the UEE. The ability to use grammar correctly (all teachers), the ability to have an appropriate range of vocabulary knowledge (all teachers), the ability to understand texts (all teachers), the ability to analyze information in the text (all but 2 teachers), and the ability to make inferences from information in a text (7 teachers)

were reported as the elements tested in the UEE. However, 4 teachers were dubious about "the ability to translate from L2 to L1. They believed that although test-takers are not directly tested on translation, but they usually have to resort to translation to better comprehend the texts. Two teachers also referred to "the ability to understand the organization of a text" as one component tested in the UEE .

Attitudes toward the UEE

In this section, through seven questions teachers were explored on their attitudes toward the UEE. Based on the results, all teachers believed that UEE does not test those skills which are needed in real-life situations. As good features of the UEE, some teachers referred to the fairness of it (due to the scoring technique), clarity of the accurate answer, and easy scoring. However, five teachers found no good feature for it. As bad features, most teachers pointed out to the skills tested in the UEE which are limited to grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. They considered this as a negative feature because these skills are not the real skills learners need. Moreover they complained of the limits this test puts on their teaching. Questions 6 and 7 asked teachers if they agreed that some changes should be done about the UEE English test and, if yes, what skills or aspects they thought should be tested. All teachers seemed to agree with the idea of innovation in the UEE English test and most of them referred to listening, speaking and writing as the necessary skills to be tested. However, some teachers considered it to some extent impractical. Some teachers also believed that these skills as well as grammar and vocabulary should be tested.

Analysis of the interviews

The results confirmed the findings obtained through the observations which showed clear evidence of washback effect of the UEE on the teachers involved in the study. The effect seemed to be kind of negative in the sense that teachers were engaged in teaching and practicing the narrow aspects tested in the UEE rather than the development of the real skills students need. Based on the obtained results, it seems to be taken for granted that UEE drives teachers to do something undesirable, such as over-reliance on formal teaching, neglect of aural/oral aspects of English, a limited variety of classroom organization patterns, (for example, teacher-fronted or lock-step classroom, etc). Therefore, there seems to be an undesirable educational practice in high schools, where there is overemphasis on formal aspects of English rather than its use, and whose main cause seems to be the presence of the examination in which formal aspects are unduly emphasized.

The observed evidence that teachers involved in this study all responded in the same way emphasized that a single washback effect is not inevitable. The results of the study did not reveal any clear distinctions between the teachers. However, it seemed the effect may be slightly more at the pre-university level at which more overt instances of the effect of the test were observed. The data showed that teachers were aware of the content and format of the UEE. It can be concluded that as the test has followed the

same format and specified content, teaching to the test has been more feasible. What is clear is that although the UEE is not the only factor driving teachers to teach the way they teach, no doubt it has significant effect. There is a clear evidence of the notion of teaching to the test. Under the UEE test, the teaching objectives seem to be the UEE demands. Teachers are expected and forced to develop a teaching syllabus which helps students succeed at this test. In addition, most teachers expressed their negative views toward the way they have to do in their classrooms.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study confirmed Alderson and Wall's (1993) notion which described the washback effect as an inevitability; that is, the introduction of a test would necessarily lead to a washback effect. Moreover, the present study indicated the presence of a single and uniform response among these teachers which was negative and which seemed to depend on the qualities of the test rather than on the teachers involved. Hence, the results of this study would be helpful to test developers to consider the likely effect of their tests in action and to the educational community in general to understand the function of the UEE as a powerful and high-stakes test –not only in language teaching but also in general education in high schools– and it would call for more research on the issue.

However, it should be noted that the UEE might not be the only factor influencing teachers' methodology use and their approach toward teaching. There might be other factors influencing and mediating the teachers' teaching approach and thus the washback effect of the UEE. From the obtained results, it became clear that teachers were not so familiar with new approaches to teaching English. Therefore, providing well-organized and instructive pre-service and in-service trainings and making teachers familiar with new methods in language teaching seems necessary because the degree of teachers' familiarity with the range of teaching methods might be a factor mediating the process of washback effect and might lessen the negative effect of the UEE.

Hence, it can be implied that in order to induce beneficial washback from the university entrance examination, different types of problems need to be solved. The attempts to innovate an educational system could not be successful simply by changing the examination system. This may also require teacher training and support, pre-service or in-service, improving the textbooks, providing better educational facilities, etc. If the UEE is to be replaced by a direct test of a much more communicative nature and if a new test is to help change teaching, support has to be given to teachers help affect the change. However, more longitudinal studies including more participants are suggested.

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