

# THE WASHBACK EFFECTS OF TESTING PRACTICES ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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**Abstract.** Testing is one of the critical aspects of every teaching and learning process that enable the teacher to assess student achievement on the expected learning outcome. Testing can often be viewed as an external trigger for student motivation to learn. Every testing may bring both positive and negative washback effects. This article scrutinizes from the available literature and studies about the washback impact of testing on English language teaching. The last part of the article puts particular attention on such an effect in Indonesian ELT context indicating a negative impact of student focusing more on the achievement of the score rather than on learning outcome.

**Keywords:** Washback Effects, Education Components, Testing Practices, English Language Teaching

## INTRODUCTION

English is widely used in many countries because of its position as an International language. Considering its high status, many non-English-speaking-countries including Indonesia puts English as either compulsory or extracurricular subject. Now, English is being taught in both formal and informal institution in Indonesia. This phenomenon of making English teaching as part of education in Indonesia. English teaching needs much time and efforts because Indonesian students, often find difficulties in joining English teaching. English is not their first language so that teachers should use various methods and media to make English teaching interesting and attractive. Making interesting and attractive English teaching, students can easily take part in the process.

Having good process of English teaching, the results must be satisfied too for the components of teaching such as teachers, students, teaching methodology, materials, and etc. Considering the reason, it is important to know the result of the teaching program for the further improvement of English teaching. To find the result of the teaching practices, the schools usually administer tests. The tests can be informal such as homework, presentation project, and discussion, or formal such as mid-test and final-test. If the test result is good, everything will run as usual. However, if the result is not as what being expected, many things should be rearranged. From the test, the schools will also know how far the students achieve the teaching and learning target.

Regarding the testing practices on English language teaching, the effect can not be avoided. Completing the test, the teachers and the students will know the results. From the results, they will get feedback. This feedback will lead to either a negative or positive impact on the teachers or the students. This impact of testing practices on English language teaching is usually called as washback. Further, the washback effects of the testing practices on English language teaching is discussed in the following parts of this essay.

Based on the background of the study, the objective of the study is specified to find the washback effects of testing practices on English language teaching. However, because of the limitation of time, energy, and access to the literature, this study focuses on the washback effects of testing practices on English language teaching.

### *Washback Effects and English Language Teaching*

Before discussing English language teaching in Indonesia, it is essential to know the position of English in Indonesia. According to Tickoo (1995, p.261), EFL is learned in the classroom where the primary source of the language is a prescribed textbook taught by a teacher. If English teaching is only conducted in the classroom and the language is not being practiced or used in daily life, then English is called a foreign language, not a second language. Foreign language refers to a language that is rarely used in regular communication. From the explanation, it is evident that the position of English in Indonesia is as a foreign language since it is only used in the classroom as a part of the teaching process. Moreover, English is rarely used to maintain communication outside the class. Regarding the position of English as a foreign language, it is essential to know the components of teaching which will influence learners.

Zhu and Zhou state that there are three components that influence learners in taking part in the teaching process (Zhu & Zhou, 2012). The first is conation component, which means the belief to a specific aim. The second is an affective component, which means like and dislikes towards the goal. The third is conation component, which means someone's intention and action to achieve the aim. In the teaching process, the student's positive attitude is helpful for his study, where negative attitude will inevitably restrain his English. It can be concluded that in joining the English teaching process, the components of learners will influence them to get satisfied results.

The next discussion is the view of English as stated by Dardjowidjojo. According to Dardjowidjojo, English is viewed as follows. (Dardjowidjojo, 1997)

1. A means of international communication in all practice fields or walks of life.
2. A medium through which scientific knowledge, and new technologies, can be accessed and implemented to succeeding in the global marketplace.
3. A source of vocabulary for the development and modernization of Indonesia.
4. A way to get to know native speakers of English, their language, culture, and literature, or as a means of expanding one's intellectual horizon.

Considering the view of English, the teaching of English must be able to cover the learners' expectation toward the light of English. The success of the teaching process will be known by administering testing the practices. Then, discussion related to testing practices is presented next.

Teaching English materials to learners is not enough. Teachers need to evaluate their program by checking students' understanding by using assessment both informal and formal. Informal assessment is an activity that is done by teachers in the middle of the teaching process, but it is not realized by the students. In an informal evaluation, teachers have to measure the performance of their students, the progress they made, and the problems they have, and provide them with useful feedback (Haris & McCann 1994, p.2); and formal assessment is seen as something that is conducted at the end of the learning activity such as a

test or exam. It is clear that teachers may assess students through both formal and informal assessment.

Haris& McCann (1994, p.26) write that there are four reasons for conducting the test as follows:

1. To find out a candidate's suitability to pursue a course of study, although this is not the case in state education.
2. To find out how a student is developing during a course of study and possibly to identify problem areas before a course ends.
3. To compare student performance with that of other students.
4. To find out how much a student has learned during the course or academic year.

From the previous discussion, it is clear that testing has a vital role in the English teaching process. Testing practice can avoid learning failures caused by incomplete mastery of prerequisites so that it is needed to administer tests during English teaching. Next, the impact of testing practices or washback is explained.

There are many notions which identify what washback is. Washback is the influence of the test on the classroom which can be either beneficial or harmful (Buck as cited in Spratt, 2005). While Messick (as cited in Spratt, 2005, p. 8) states that washback is the extent to which the test influences language teachers and learners to do things that they would not necessarily otherwise do. Then, Bailey (cited in Spratt, 2005, p. 8) gives an opinion that washback is the influence of testing on teaching and learning. To summarize, washback is the effect of the result of testing practices which will influence the participants of the teaching process.

Then, Alderson and Wall state that tests have an impact on what teachers teach but not on how they teach. If teachers use tests to get their students to pay more attention to lessons and to prepare more thoroughly, it is then a positive washback. (Alderson & Wall, 1993) However, if teachers fear poor results and the associated guilt which might lead to the desire for their students to achieve high scores in tests, it might be a reason for teaching to the test. Consequentially, teachers narrow the curriculum and produce negative washback.

According to Djuric, washback positions itself as a gap or a bridge between teachers and testers as well as an indicator for a need for change. (Djurić, 2015, p. 19) If teachers are not isolated from testing and if they recognize and respect ethical principles in the classroom, their awareness process works towards positive washback, and they will promote good practices. The complex nature of washback allows full expectations in different areas. Consequently, washback can be understood as a powerful tool to introduce changes not only in teaching and testing but also in educational policy if it is supported by evidence and research.

There are two types of washback. The first type of washback is negative, and the second one is positive. Negative washback occurs when test content or format is based on the narrow definition of language ability, and it constrains the teaching/learning context (Brown 2010, p. 126). It can also be said that negative washback is harmful or undesirable effect on teaching and learning of a particular test, which means as a poor test in which something that the teachers or learners do not wish to teach or learn and a mismatch between the content and the test.

On the other hand, Haris& McCann (1994, p.26) propose that a test can have a positive influence if it contains authentic, real-life examples of the type of tasks which the learners will need to perform in the future. A test can have a negative influence if they contain artificial tasks not linked to real future needs. A test which is given by the teacher can also influence students' point of view; if most of the test contains structure, then the student will think that the critical component in English is structure.

Some researchers firmly believe that it is feasible and desirable to bring about beneficial change in language teaching by changing examinations, which refers to so-called positive washback. This term refers to tests or examinations that influence teaching and learning beneficially (Alderson & Wall, 1993, p. 116) when testing procedure encourages good teaching practices. In this sense, teachers and learners have a positive attitude towards the test and work willingly towards its objectives. According to Sukyadia test's washback effect will be harmful if it fails to reflect the learning principles and course objectives to which the test supposedly relates, and it will be positive if the effects are beneficial and encourage the whole range of desired changes. (Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011, p. 97) Alderson and Wall (1993, in Sukyadi 2011, p.99) stress that the quality of the washback effect might be independent of the quality of the test: some tests, good or bad, may result in beneficial or detrimental washback effects.

Washback happens as a result of testing practices influence many areas of language teaching. According to Spratt (2005, pp.8-21), washback will affect curriculums, materials, teaching methods, feelings and attitudes, and learning. Seeing the result of testing practices, teachers will make changes in those areas. Regarding the curriculum, the result of testing practices will have an impact on the content of teaching, time allocation, and class size. Next, related to materials, teachers decide on the use of text-books and past papers. The last area affected by washback is teaching methods where teachers will make changes in teaching approaches or techniques after considering the result of washback.

In line with Spratt, Pizarro (2009, in Sukyadi 2011, p.99) argues some teaching aspects that are affected by washback namely curriculum, materials, teaching methods, feelings and attitudes, learning, teaching strategies, and teaching contents. (Marian Amengual-Pizarro, 2009)

1. Curriculum: the results of some studies carried out on washback shows that examination has had a demonstrable effect on the context of language lesson-narrowing of the curriculum to those areas most likely to be tested (Alderson & Wall, 1993, p.125).
2. Teaching materials: material, in this case, is the exam-related textbooks and past papers. As the exam is getting closer, there is greater use of past paper and commercial exam-public examinations (Alderson & Wall 1993, p.125).
3. Teaching methods: This study refers to teaching approaches and techniques. Alderson & Wall (1993, p.125) state that a study in Sri Lanka showed that the exam had virtually no impact on the way that teachers teach. Teaching toward the high-stakes EFL exam lead teachers to teach through simulating the exam tasks or through carrying out other activities directly aiming at developing exam skills or strategies. (Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman, 1996, p. 311)

From the explanation, it can be stated that the most crucial areas affected by washback are curriculums, teaching materials, and teaching methods. When teachers find out the test results, they may rearrange those areas for better improve the quality of their teaching process. Next, studies on washback effects of testing practices on English language teaching are discussed.

## DISCUSSIONS

Two studies are discussing the washback effects of testing practice on English language teaching. The first study was conducted by Aftab, Qureshi, and William entitled Investigating the Washback Effect of the Pakistani Intermediate English Examination published in 2014. They explored washback from the intermediate examination through the perceptions of teachers and students. The research chooses teachers and students as the participants. Also, it relied on a qualitative approach utilizing interviews to collect data from six teachers and students. The data was analyzed using open-coding. The result revealed that

there seems to be a strong negative washback from the examinations on teaching methodology, content, and learning.

What was stated by Aftab, Qureshi, and William that there was negative washback on teaching methodology, content, and learning is in line with the idea from (Spratt, 2005, pp.8-21 and ). The result of the study proves that those areas might be affected by washback either positive or negative. In their research, the areas were negatively influenced by washback. The following results are taken from Aftab, Qureshi, and William will give a broader view of why tests provide a negative washback to teaching methodology, content, and learning.

1. Teachers are teaching towards the examination, and their teaching appears to be directly influenced by the assessment procedures. They only focus on investigation related activities to improve students score
2. Teachers believe that the most effective way for their students to achieve higher test scores is to be provided with practice in examination-related tasks rather than content-based teaching or communicative language teaching.
3. Teachers tend to ignore speaking and listening skills in favor of reading and writing that are tested in the examination. They justify the negligence as they mainly focus on preparing the students for the exams.
4. Teachers' responses also revealed that though the examination focused on reading and writing skills, it neglected to assess the higher order cognitive skill. The writing skills are mostly tested through memorized answers; the reading comprehension questions are text-based and direct, and do not encourage critical thinking.
5. Multiple choices (objective) only assess the lower order skills of recall or recognition which made scoring high on the examinations relatively easy for the students.
6. Students reported that the examination did not help them in improving their English language skills because their learning is passive rather than active. Most of the undertaken activities are directly linked to examination questions.
7. Students heavily depend on rote memorization from guides (test practice books) and are of the view the examination itself promotes these practices.
8. There is washback on materials as well since the teachers adopt a textbook oriented methodology and do not leave anything from the textbooks based on the beliefs that the students may be tested on it. Teachers use past examination papers as practice material also indicates that teachers make use of examination activities to train the learners for the examination.

Sukyadi and Mardiani did the second study under the titled *The Washback Effect of the English National Examination (ENE) on English Teachers' Classroom Teaching and Students' Learning*, published in 2011. They discover washback effect from English National Examination (ENE) for secondary schools, the subjects were three secondary schools categorized based on their national examination achievement: high-level achiever, moderate-level achiever, and low-level achiever. In the study, the researchers used a qualitative method where the data collection techniques were observation, interviews, questioner, and document, they also decided to make teachers and students their participant. The results are ENE has an influential impact on teachers' teaching in the aspect of activity/time arrangement, teaching materials, teaching content, teaching methods, and on the feeling and attitudes of the students. However, the dimensions of the washback of the ENE on both teachers and students are negative, reliable, specific and short.

Furthermore, Sukyadi and Mardiani found there were negative and strong effects from English National Examination. This analysis was adopted from Cheng & Watanabe (2004), and the results are:

1. In students' learning, the effect of national examination washback strongly exists.

2. In learning materials, the negative effect is very dominant. The students only focus on the material that is tested in the National Examination, they learn a lot of reading genres including text types and vocabulary, and also exercise their listening skills.
3. On students' learning, the intensity of the washback effect that is caused by the English National Examination is strong. This occurs because everything happening in the classroom is determined by English National Examination, and it makes students learn towards the examination.
4. Classroom activity is effected by negative washback because the main activity is "teaching to the test" and "practice the test" it means the whole class activity is a both doing exercises.

From the two studies, it is evident that testing practices yield negative washback. Testing practices make teachers and students more focus to pass the test without considering the real notion of teaching English that is to transfer knowledge. Teachers and students are maintaining test-oriented learning. They fall to unreal English teaching program. At the end of the program, they get nothing but score since from the start they already understand the idea English is a foreign language where the need is only from classroom activity. Indeed, English is a foreign language in Indonesia, but teachers and students may make changes to get a better result. They should be test-oriented practitioners for it clear that testing practices give negative washback.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

English as a foreign language has been taught in Indonesia for years. Regarding the teaching of English in Indonesia, teachers administer test to know the quality of their teaching program. However, the testing practices on English language teaching give negative washback. These adverse washback effects make the teachers and students maintain test-oriented learning. Though adverse washback effects come out as the result of the testing practices, teachers continue the test-oriented learning in their teaching program which can be seen from the two studies discussed in the previous part.

Teachers should change the components of their teaching practices. Teachers and students should not anymore maintain test-oriented learning. Teachers may provide authentic materials, for example, which will lead to the real use of English. So that, English will not only be for the need of classroom activity. Following the authentic materials, the testing practices should also be authentic. In the end, it is expected to yield positive washback effects of testing practices on English language teaching.

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