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UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

WASHBACK EFFECT OF THE UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMINATION ON IRANIAN PRE-UNIVERSITY ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' CURRICULUM PLANNING AND INSTRUCTION

MOHAMMAD REZA GHORBANI

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By

MOHAMMAD REZA GHORBANI

Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

October 2008

UPM

DEDICATION

Dedicated to my beloved wife, Malihe, and my loving son, Morteza

Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in Fulfilment of the Requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

WASHBACK EFFECT OF THE UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMINATION ON IRANIAN PRE-UNIVERSITY ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' CURRICULUM PLANNING AND INSTRUCTION

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October 2008

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The impact of a test on teaching and learning is commonly referred to as the washback effect. In Iran, the university entrance exam (UEE) is assumed to exert a negative washback effect on language education. This study examined the nature and scope of the impact of the UEE on pre-university English teachers' (PETs) teaching and curricular planning in six dimensions, that is, classroom activities and time arrangement, teaching methods, teaching materials, syllabus design, teaching contents, and classroom assessment. It also explored PETs' expectations of the UEE.

In this study, eight factors (independent variables) were studied under two subheadings: 1) teacher characteristics (teaching experience, educational background, professionalism, and gender) and 2) context characteristics (school type, school location, perceived students' learning attitudes, and perceived external pressure).

In the first phase, 220 subjects selected based on the proportional stratified random sampling responded to the questionnaires. The Cronbach alpha of the questionnaire was 0.97. In the second phase, eight purposively selected PETs participated in two focus group interviews. Pearson product moment correlation coefficient, t-test statistics, and stepwise regression were used to analyze the quantitative data from the survey questionnaires and a systematic note-based technique recommended by Krueger (2002) was used to analyze and interpret the qualitative data from the focus group interviews.

The findings showed that PETs' perceived professionalism in teaching (r = .388) and perceived students' learning attitudes (r = .464) were positively and moderately associated with their perceptions of the impact of the UEE on their instruction and curricular planning. There was also a low positive relationship between teachers' perceived professionalism in teaching and their expectations of the UEE (r = .229).

Based on the results from the stepwise regression analysis, perceived students' learning attitudes (21.2%), perceived external pressure in teaching (3.0%), and perceived professionalism in teaching (1.1%) can be used to reliably predict PETs' perceptions of the impact of the UEE. Furthermore, perceived professionalism (.048%) and school location (.031%) can be used to reliably predict PETs' expectations of the UEE.

Almost all PETs, regardless of their teaching experience, educational background, gender, the school type, and the school location where they were teaching perceived the negative effect of the UEE similarly. The implication is that potentially influential factors such as teachers' experience and educational background play a neutral role in adopting effective teaching techniques due to the washback phenomenon. Thus, if the UEE is not reformed to encourage English teachers to teach communicatively, spending millions of Rials on training and improving their level of knowledge at teacher training colleges and universities would be a great loss.

Abstrak tesis ini telah dibentangkan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk Ijazah Doktor Falsafah

KESAN "WASHBACK" TERHADAP UJIAN KELAYAKAN MEMASUKI UNIVERSITI GURU BAHASA INGGERIS PRA UNIVERSITI IRAN DALAM BIDANG PERANCANGAN KURIKULUM DAN PENGAJARAN

Oleh

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Kesan ujian ke atas pengajaran dan pembelajaran selalunya dikaitkan dengan kesan 'washback'. Di Iran, Ujian Kelayakan Universiti (UKU) dianggap mempunyai kesan "washback" yang negatif ke atas pembelajaran bahasa. Penyelidikan yang dibuat memfokuskan kepada kesan UKU ke atas guru Bahasa Inggeris pra-universiti (PET) dalam bidang pengajaran dan perancangan kurikulum berkaitan enam dimensi, iaitu latihan dalam kelas, pengagihan masa, kaedah pengajaran,sumber pengajaran, reka bentuk silabus, kandungan pengajaran, dan penafsiran dalam bilik darjah. Ia juga merupakan penerokaan ekspektasi PET terhadap UKU yang berkaitan dengan pengujian.

Dalam kajian ini, lapan faktor pemboleh ubah bebas dikatakan berkait rapat dengan kesan UKU dalam konteks pelajar Iran menguasai bahasa

asing (EFL) telah dilaksanakan di bawah dua bidang iaitu: (1) sifat guru (pengalaman mengajar, latarbelakang pendidikan, profesionalisme dan jantina) dan (2) dalam konteks guru (jenis sekolah, lokasi sekolah, tingkahlaku pembelajaran di sekolah dan tekanan luaran).

Dalam fasa pertama, mengikut persampelan rawak berstrata, seramai 220 PET telah dipilih sebagai responden untuk menjawab instrumen kajian. Nilai Cronbach Alpha soal selidik yang digunakan ialah .97. Fasa kedua kajian, sejumlah lapan sampel PET dipilih secara bertujuan untuk ditemu bual secara berfokus. Korelasi Pearson, statistik ujian-t, dan regresi 'stepwise' digunakan untuk menganalisis data kuantitatif soal selidik dan teknik nota bersistematik seperti yang dicadangkan oleh Kruger (2002) telah digunakan untuk menganalisis dan menginterpretasi data kualitatif kumpulan temubual berfokus.

Hasil kajian menunjukkan terdapat korelasi antara PET dengan profesionalisme dalam pengajaran (r=.388) dan korelasi PET dengan tingkahlaku pelajar terhadap pembelajaran (r=.464). Ini dapat dihubungkaitkan dengan kesan UKU dalam memberi arahan dan perancangan kurikulum. Terdapat perkaitan yang rendah antara penerimaan profesionalisme guru dalam pengajaran dengan expetasi jangkaan UKU (r=.229).

Berdasarkan kepada keputusan dari analisis regresi 'stepwise', didapati tingkah laku pembelajaran (21.2%), tekanan luaran dalam pengajaran

(3.0%), dan pengamatan pengajaran secara profesional (1.1%) boleh digunakan untuk meramalkan kebolehpercayaan PET dalam pengamatan ke atas kesan UKU.Sehubungan itu, hanya pengamatan profesional (0.048%) dan lokasi sekolah (0.031%) boleh digunakan untuk meramalkan kebolehpercayaan PET. Semua temu bual yang dijalankan oleh PET mencerminkan kesan negatif UKU dan mengharapkan pihak berkuasa membentuk kembali UKU berdasarkan teori pengajaran dan pengujian semasa.

Kesemua PET tidak kira dari segi pengalaman pengajaran, latar belakang pendidikan, jantina, jenis sekolah, dan lokasi sekolah dimana mereka mengamalkan pengajaran yang telah dipengaruhi oleh kesan negatif UKU yang hampir sama. Amalan ini mempunyai kesan daripada pengalaman guru dan latar belakang pendidikan mereka memainkan peranan secara 'neutral' dalam melaksanakan pengajaran yang berkesan akibat daripada kesan 'washback'. Disebaliknya, jika UKU tidak dilakukan pengubahsuaian untuk menggalakkan guru untuk mengajar Bahasa Inggeris secara berkomunikasi, ia akan membawa kerugian besar walaupun wang ringgit yang banyak dihabiskan untuk meningkatkan mutu pengajaran guru Bahasa Inggeris peringkat kolej dan universiti.

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I certify that an Examination Committee has met on **15 October 2008** to conduct the final examination of **Mohammad Reza Ghorbani** on his PhD thesis entitled "**Washback Effect of the University Entrance Examination on Iranian Pre-university English Teachers' Curriculum Planning and Instruction**" in accordance with University Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Act 1980 and University Pertanian Malaysia (Higher Degree) Regulations 1981. The Committee recommends that the student be awarded the Doctor of Philosophy.

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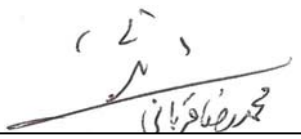
DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.



MOHAMMAD REZA GHORBANI

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

1. CRT	Criterion-Referenced Test(ing)
2. EEO	Education Evaluation Organization
3. EFL	English as a Foreign Language
4. ESL	English as a Second Language
5. ME	Ministry of Education
6. MMH	Ministry of Medical Health
7. MSRT	Ministry of Science, Research and Technology
8. MUET	Malaysian University English Test
9. NRT	Norm-Referenced Test(ing)
10. PETs	Pre-university English Teachers
11. TOEFL	Test of English as a Foreign Language
12. UEE	University Entrance Examination
13. UPM	Universiti Putra Malaysia

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This study is basically divided into five chapters. The first chapter addresses the background, research context, statement of the problem, significance of the study, objectives of the study, research questions, research hypotheses, definition of the terms, and limitations of the study.

1.1 Background

Traditionally, language testing researchers have focused their attention on inherent issues in tests to improve their reliability and validity. Nevertheless, the washback effect is not limited to the test itself. It includes other teacher and contextual factors which may be different from context to context. Only recently have some researchers turned to the empirical investigation of the washback phenomenon (Cheng, Watanabe, & Curtis, 2004).

In Iran, educational policies are decided primarily by the central government. All of the decisions made by the central government are passed down through provincial organizations for implementation at lower levels which have less authority in terms of decision-making. All major educational policies such as the school systems, the curriculum standards, the compilation of textbooks, the examination system, etc. are under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education (ME).

According to Ostovar Namaghi (2006), three forces control and steer teachers' work in the Iranian educational context. First, since teachers cannot choose a textbook which is in line with their students' needs, the input is controlled by the prescribed curriculum. Second, the output is controlled by the mandated national testing scheme so that teachers cannot develop tests which have a positive backwash on teaching and learning. Third, since high score is culturally equal to higher achievement, the process of teaching and learning is controlled by the grade pressure from students, parents, and school principals. He argues that teachers are pure implementers of the prescribed initiatives and schemes surrounded by cultural constraints, which prevent them from using their own professional knowledge and experience.

When no consequences are attached to test results, they will be less motivating. However, if high-stakes consequences are attached to them, they may lead to negative and harmful outcomes in which teachers are implicitly and covertly encouraged to teach to the test and narrow the curriculum. The university entrance examination (UEE) in Iran is an embodiment of such a negative washback effect.

The centralized control of curriculum and assessment in Iran is assumed to have led to teaching towards the high-stakes UEE which affects the future career and lives of pre-university and high school students. Iranian senior high school English teachers, in general, and pre-university English teachers (PETs), in particular, feel they are expected to prepare their

students for university entrance exams by having them translate English texts into Persian. They explain and put an emphasis on the grammatical structures explicitly. They also try to improve their students' reading skill at the expense of listening, speaking and even writing skills. The dominant methodology is grammar-translation with a teacher-centered approach in which language usage and not actual language use is emphasized (Golsorkhi, 2008).

Many students at pre-university and academic senior high schools assume that the purpose of English teaching and learning is preparation for the UEE. Students usually influence PETs' instruction through their expectations that they should prepare them for the UEE. Since the UEE influences students' future career and lives, teachers often teach to the test and students focus only on those activities and skills that are likely to appear on the test. Due to the strong competitive atmosphere among students to jot down whatever the teacher says and focus on cramming it to get ready for the exam, they use their short-term memory to disgorge whatever they have crammed in their exam papers (Hosseini, 2007).

According to Smith, Noble, Cabay, Heinecke, Junker, and Saffron (1994) what is offered by policy makers is perceived differently by practitioners. Teachers and principals reinterpret and adapt it. What is presented in the classroom is a kind of instruction and evaluation which reflects teachers' own interpretation of the situation (Geisinger, 1994). Since teachers are implementers of educational theories, knowing their perceptions

contributes to predicting what happens in the classroom (Eslami-Rasekh & Valizadeh, 2008; Jia, Eslami, & Burlbaw, 2006).

By examining the Iranian research context, this study identified a gap between curriculum planners and examinations authorities at the decision making level. Curriculum planning is under the supervision of the ME but the UEE is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT). Curriculum planners may have different objectives which are not in alignment with testing authorities' objectives.

The second gap was identified between intervening agencies (universities which provide teachers education programs) and decision makers. There are different kinds of institutes such as public and private universities and teacher training centers and colleges whose English language graduates can apply for employment in the ME as teachers. Most of them are not particularly trained to become English teachers but they are usually employed by the ME.

The third gap was identified between intervening agencies (higher education institutes) and implementing agencies (e.g., schools including administration and teachers). Whatever teachers have learned at universities may not be practical at the implementation level. What boils down to students is a kind of methodology which has been filtered through textbooks, principals' perspectives, and teachers' beliefs.