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*DOI:*  
[10.1093/elt/ccac005](https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccac005)

*Publication date:*  
2023

*Licence:*  
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*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Ali, M., & Hamid, M. O. (2023). Teacher agency and washback: insights from classrooms in rural Bangladesh. *ELT Journal*, 77(1), 52-61. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/ccac005>

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# Teacher agency and washback: insights from classrooms in rural Bangladesh

Md. Maksud Ali<sup>✉</sup> and M. Obaidul Hamid<sup>✉</sup>

*Although washback has been widely explored by applied linguists and education researchers, little attention has been paid to teacher agency in relation to it. It is critical to understand how language teachers navigate their pedagogy and respond to the broader curricular goals at a time when schools and teachers are being governed using examination and test data as accountability mechanisms. Drawing on data from classroom observations and interviews with two English teachers from a rural Bangladeshi school, this article illustrates how these teachers exercised their agency even under strong political pressure to improve students' test data. The findings indicate that traditional understanding of washback as deterministic may be insufficient to account for the complex ways in which teachers may respond to broader educational goals in the context of washback. The study concludes with theoretical, empirical, and pedagogic implications for washback research and teacher education.*

**Key words:** washback, datafication, teacher agency, hybridity in ELT, teacher education

## Introduction

Washback—the process by which assessment practices may influence learning/teaching practices—has received much attention in language teaching research. Traditional understanding of the concept represents teaching and testing as interdependent (Hughes 2003), providing a deterministic model for washback research. Based on this model, researchers have investigated how examinations influenced language programmes and categorized the influence in positive or negative terms. Recent washback studies, however, have investigated the factors that mediate the washback process (e.g. Ali and Hamid 2020). One such factor is ‘datafication’, which ‘refers to the use of [test] data in a way that has become increasingly detached from supporting learning and is much more concerned with the management of teacher performance as an end in itself’ (Stevenson 2017: 537). Increased use of performance data as

an accountability measure has resulted in a negative washback effect on pedagogy, leading teachers to teach to the test (Menken 2006). Although these insights help us to understand how teachers' pedagogic practices are influenced by examination and test data, not much is known about how teachers navigate their pedagogic practices under such data pressure to pursue curricular goals.

This article illustrates that although the influence of examination and test data on pedagogy is undeniable, teachers may also utilize their agency to respond to broader educational goals. We argue that examining teacher agency is critical to developing a broader understanding of washback, which recognizes agency within the testing–teaching context. This understanding may help not only to go beyond a deterministic model of washback that represents an overstated causal relationship between teaching and testing, but also to develop teachers' critical awareness of their professional role and encourage them to exercise agency under the prevalent data regime.

### Washback and the question of teacher agency

Washback is generally understood as the influence of testing on teaching and learning (Alderson and Wall 1993). Washback research has tried to understand whether washback existed in a certain context and how tests affected pedagogy, positively or negatively. Washback is termed positive when teachers and learners work towards programme goals in a stipulated way. However, washback is considered negative if the pedagogy emphasizes materials and techniques relevant to the examination content, bypassing language programme goals. It is generally argued that good tests can promote good teaching and learning outcomes. By the same token, poor learning outcomes can be attributed to testing that is not aligned with programme goals. Thus, a causal relationship is believed to exist between testing and teaching, indicating that the success of programmes is contingent upon testing–teaching reciprocity (Hughes 2003). However, scholars have also indicated that washback is a complex phenomenon, 'an interactive multi-directional process involving a constant interplay of different degrees of complexity among the different washback components' (El-ebyary 2009: 2). Such an approach to washback requires researchers to go beyond a simplistic cause-and-effect hypothesis (Alderson and Wall 1993). From a complexity perspective, researchers have recently reported social-psychological, political, and economic factors that mediate washback (e.g. Ali and Hamid 2020). One dominant political factor is the use of test data as an accountability mechanism to govern teachers' work (Stevenson 2017). With the growing datafication of teaching, negative washback in the form of 'teaching to the test' has been widely reported (Menken, 2006). However, the likelihood of teachers exercising their agency has been little researched in the context of negative washback.

### Teacher agency in language teaching

In its simplest form, agency refers to 'capacity of people to act purposefully and reflectively on their world' (Rogers and Wetzel 2013: 63). However, a more comprehensive view of agency does not separate individuals' capacity from the broader sociopolitical and ideological contexts. In this view, individuals are located within these complex systems to understand how they respond to broader policy goals with prevailing contextual

constraints. From this perspective, teacher agency is a much more complex phenomenon, and understanding agency requires an understanding of ‘the conditions surrounding teachers’ work [which are] fundamental to the exercise of agency and [which] cannot be dismissed in any analysis of teacher capacity to act’ (Chisholm et al. 2019: 126). Taking this complex view, different studies have explored how teachers’ agency may play out in a ‘range of structural, cultural, and material conditions’ (Chisholm et al. 2019: 139). Gardinier (2012), for example, examined how teachers responded to broader policy reforms in Albania. In this context, introducing a global policy resulted in tensions between the way local pedagogy worked and the way human capital formation was envisioned in Albanian education without considering local values and contextual realities. Although the teachers reported in the study ‘selectively adopted’ the policy, they also generated hybrid classroom practices in relation to the complex realities of their context. This is an example of how teachers’ agency plays out in a complex situation and how they produce practices that are ‘hybrid’, ‘innovative’, and ‘situationally constrained’ (Gardinier 2012: 661). We argue that this agency and teachers’ capacity to navigate through complex situations and political pressures should be recognized in washback research. This is important particularly at a time when learner-centred practices are being challenged by accountability regimes. Littlewood (2009: 246) argues that in the context of accountability, the focus has shifted from ‘the processes which occur as part of learning’ to ‘processes which are the intended outcomes of this learning’, and the outcome is often evaluated using performance data. Thus, with growing datafication, understanding how language teachers navigate their pedagogic practices and the complex ways in which they exercise their agency can provide useful insights into locally relevant pedagogy (Canagarajah 2005).

## The study

The Bangladeshi government has emphasized the role of English for its citizens to participate in the globalized economy. Accordingly, communicative language teaching (CLT), emphasizing the use of communicative tasks such as pair and group works in the classroom, was introduced into the national curriculum during the 1990s. However, studies have reported that CLT has not yielded the desired positive outcomes (Rahman, Pandian, and Kaur 2018). One key reason for this is the negative influence of the public English examination on pedagogy (Ali and Hamid 2020). This examination has ignored two key skills, listening and speaking, although both these skills are emphasized in the curriculum. This teaching–testing divergence was the result of innovating the curriculum (CLT) but continuing with traditional assessment (pen and paper test) (Ali, Hamid, and Hardy 2020). Despite these inconsistencies, test data have become critical in the last decade with significant implications for teachers’ work. Their performance is judged by the number of students who pass the examination with high grade point averages. This has created challenges, particularly in rural contexts, where language teachers are faced with multiple constraints including lack of material support and poor language learning environments for students. These constraints are compounded by political pressures around test data. To save their jobs teachers are compelled to prepare students for examinations, while also responding to the broader curricular goals by teaching communication skills, notably

writing which has become an inseparable part of daily communication. In the context of this growing datafication, there has been little research on how teachers respond to the broader curricular goals. In this article, we were motivated by this aim to explore the following question:

How do secondary English teachers respond to the broader curricular goals under washback effects, which are mediated by political and pedagogic factors?

## Methodology

This article is part of a larger study on the policy and practice of English and human capital development in secondary schools in Bangladesh. The study has employed a qualitative case-study approach (Creswell and Poth 2018). The empirical data reported in this article were collected from one rural school. The students came from poor families and their parents were farmers, taxi-drivers, and day-labourers with minimal formal education. Two English teachers (Teacher 1 and Teacher 2), who had worked in this school for over fifteen years, are reported in this article. The teachers were interviewed to explore their beliefs and practices surrounding CLT for communication skills development. They were asked questions such as ‘What do you think of the role of CLT in developing learners’ communication skills?’ and ‘How do you implement CLT in your classroom?’ These were followed by further probing questions. Data generated by the interviews helped to understand different factors that mediated the implementation of CLT. One of the dominant factors that emerged from the data was the influence of the secondary-level examination and test data on the teachers’ pedagogic choices. Following the interviews, two classes of each teacher were observed to understand how their views were translated into classroom practices. The observations indicated interesting practices, which were unique and embedded in the under-resourced context where the teaching took place. The teachers were observed to exercise agency to engage students who did not bring compatible dispositions into the CLT classroom. This encouraged us to organize post-observation interviews with the teachers to understand why they chose particular strategies in their pedagogic practices. Thus, the post-observation interview helped to further explore what motivated teachers to exercise agency. All the interviews and observations were recorded with a digital recorder.

The interview transcripts and observation notes were analysed based on content analysis (Creswell and Poth 2018). The transcripts and the notes were studied to perform an initial coding. The coding process followed mainly an inductive approach, but it was also informed by relevant literature on washback and agency. The initial codes were further examined to refine and classify them into different categories/themes based on their pattern (Table 1).

## Findings: understanding teacher agency in the washback context

Washback effect  
on pedagogy

Our analysis of the data revealed the structural influence of examinations on teachers’ pedagogy. As the secondary English examination does not have provision for assessing listening and speaking skills, the teachers mainly emphasized reading and writing contents from the textbook. The teachers were also observed to teach techniques and contents that were relevant to the examination. Although the CLT curriculum discouraged teaching discrete forms, teachers were observed to teach synonyms

Theme	Codes
Influence of examination and data-oriented accountability on pedagogy	Traditional testing system
	Test data and accountability
	Comparison based on test data
Agency under washback influence	Application of CLT techniques within exam preparation tasks
	Testing demand and professional commitment

TABLE 1  
Codes and Emerging Themes

and antonyms without putting the words into any meaningful context. However, the teachers explained that they needed to do this because the examination assessed synonyms and antonyms. The following conversation between the researcher (R) and Teacher 2 (T2) provides insights into what motivated teachers for this particular practice:

R: I noticed during your lesson that you taught synonyms and antonyms. Why did you do this?

T2: I taught synonyms and antonyms because these words are tested.

R: OK.

T2: Yes. There are seven alternative questions in the examination. Out of these questions, sometimes a question is set to assess students' knowledge of synonyms and antonyms.

This practice of teaching discrete language items does not correspond with the broader curricular goals of communication skills development through CLT. However, it is understandable that the practice was motivated by the traditional testing system, which has not been aligned with CLT. Thus, the examination was found to exert a negative influence on pedagogy. Similarly, the influence of the examination has extended to learners as well. As T2 explicated, students were more inclined to learning the content that was tested and occasionally resisted items that were not tested:

T2: Sometimes, I try to encourage students to practise speaking in the class, but they are not that much interested in it. They say: 'Mam, this does not appear'.

R: What do they mean by 'this does not appear'?

T2: It means speaking is not tested in secondary English exam. They don't want to spend time on what is not tested.

While the examination influenced teaching and learning by limiting pedagogy mainly to what was tested, the results (test data) of the examination are used to ensure accountability. In other words, test data intensified the influence of the examination on teachers' pedagogical practices. T1 suggested that due to this accountability teachers suffered the consequences of students' failure in English.

T1: We are MPO [Monthly Pay Order] enlisted teachers. If students do not pass, there is a possibility that our MPO will be stopped.

R: OK

T1: Then we have pressure from school management committee. We need to face them, and we are accountable to them. We need to explain why some students did not pass or got low scores.

R: Does it affect your implementation of CLT?

T1: Of course, it does. We are under multiple pressures from different directions. And in this situation, especially while we are psychologically tormented, it is difficult for us to teach the curriculum.

The extract indicates the various social-psychological pressures that teachers undergo in a data-oriented accountability regime. Ironically, although these data are used to monitor teaching and learning, they cause anxiety and fear among teachers, hindering their full response to the curriculum. Teachers are under constant pressure from multiple sources to protect their MPO by responding to the requirements of the examination and complying with the data demand. The pressure for test data also manifests at another level. T1 explained that there was a *competition* among the eight education boards in the country to demonstrate increased test data, which results in unprecedented pressures on teachers to teach to the test. As T2 explained:

R: Why do you think test data have become so important?

T2: It is because there is a competition between different education Boards to demonstrate increased test results. Which Board has got the highest pass rate has become an important matter these days. This is destroying our education system. If this competition did not exist, students could learn better.

As T2 indicates, datafication of learning and teaching has consequences for broader educational outcomes. However, the teacher's critical positionality indicates that examination and test data may not determine teachers' pedagogic dispositions because teachers are also likely to pursue what they believe is important for students. In the following section, we present classroom observation data, which illustrate the teachers' ability to exercise their agency under negative exam influences and amid growing datafication of teaching.

### Teachers' agency under the influence of washback: lesson vignettes

Despite the strong exam influence on pedagogy, classroom observation data revealed that the teachers endeavoured to exercise their agency to respond to the broader curricular goals. Both T1 and T2 were observed to employ one CLT technique (i.e. group work) even for the tasks that were prepared in keeping with the structure of the examination.

Table 2 provides the tasks and techniques of CLT that were employed in the lessons.

Both the tasks (i.e. answering short questions and gap filling) are used in assessing reading skills in the secondary English examination. In the observed lessons, the teachers used contents from the textbook, but they tried to align the tasks and techniques with those that are relevant to the examination. For example, T1 used a lesson on 'May Day' from



TABLE 2  
Exam-Relevant Tasks and  
Application of CLT Techniques

Teachers	Tasks	Technique employed
T1	Answering short questions	Group work
T1	Information transfer/gap filling	Group work
T2	Answering short questions	Group work

the textbook as teaching content. After an initial discussion of the topic, he divided the students into groups. He then wrote some questions related to the text on the blackboard. Students were asked to discuss the questions in groups and write answers in their notebooks. One student was chosen from each group as a leader who led the discussion. Finally, the student-leaders were invited one by one to read aloud the answers from their group. Similarly, in another lesson, T1 used the content about ‘International Mother Language Day’ from the textbook. This time the teacher wrote a gap-filling task on the blackboard based on the reading text. Students were divided into groups and were instructed to select the best possible answer for each gap by discussion. The students worked together and wrote the answers in their notebooks. T2 was also observed to employ group work for exam-relevant tasks. She wrote some short questions on the blackboard based on a reading text and divided students into groups so they could discuss the answers. Thus, what was interesting in these lessons is that even in the context of datafication and exam demand to align teaching to the test, both teachers employed group work within exam preparation tasks in line with CLT principles.

### Why the teachers exercised agency in the context of washback

Following these lessons in which teachers generated context-sensitive hybrid practices, we tried to understand what motivated them to undertake such practices under strong examination influence. The teachers reported several factors. Of note was their understanding of their professional role and commitment. As T1 stated:

We have chosen teaching profession to help students. It’s true that our students are weak, but I believe that we must motivate them. Things will change one day.

The reference to the students who are considered ‘weak’ in learning and who do not bring with them a compatible habitus to school is important to understand the struggles that teachers undergo in the low socioeconomic status context. In such a context, although preparing students for examination constituted the primary goal of pedagogy, the teachers also demonstrated their professional commitment. As the teachers observed:

T1: Even under the pressure of examination, sometimes we try to develop their language skills so that they can do at least basic communication with others. This will be good for them.

T2: When we plan lessons, we constantly think about how we will cover those contents which are important for examination. There is a huge pressure on us; we must prepare students for examination. However, I also think about whether my students will be able to compete with others in the future. They need to know English for their future employment.



Although both teachers used ‘we’ to indicate that these were general practices for teachers, it is possible that not all teachers demonstrate a similar kind of commitment.

Data also revealed that the teachers employed pair/group work within exam-relevant tasks as a strategy to help weaker students. As T2 explicated:

R: Why do you do this?

T2: I do this because I try to develop their language. I pair a weaker student with a better one, and I see good outcome from this. Sometimes, weaker students learn from their stronger pairs. Also, most of the time, weaker students are not willing to talk in the class. So, when I pair them with their fellow students, and they feel encouraged to speak. I think this strategy helps them to develop their communication skills.

Motivated by professional and ethical obligations, both teachers exercised their agency in the context of washback. They did this in a context where accountability is ensured by the number of students passing the examination, not based on learning for real-life communication (Ali and Hamid 2020).

## Discussion and implications

The findings reported in this article indicate that the traditional understanding of washback cannot capture the nuances around agentic roles that teachers play even under strong negative washback influence. As reported, although the influence of secondary English examination and the datafication of teaching and learning on teachers’ pedagogy is undeniable (Menken 2006), these conformity demands did not determine teachers’ pedagogic practices. Teachers exercised agency even under different structural, contextual, and political constraints (Chisholm et al. 2019) and generated hybrid practices to respond to the broader curricular goals (Gardinier 2012). On the one hand, they had to participate in a nationwide data race in a data regime to make sure that students pass the examination and teachers protect their MPO. On the other hand, as observed in the lessons, rural students demonstrated weaker learning profiles and could not cope with the curricular expectations. Schools and teachers are placed in a difficult situation by the test data, which become a powerful tool for governing their work. As a result, not only has a competition between schools and education boards become a reality, but also educational institutions and teachers have developed a compliant disposition to avoid adverse consequences. In such a situation, teaching around exam-relevant topics and tasks may be explained as a context-sensitive ‘safe’ approach, but teachers’ praxis is also motivated by their understanding of the future English language needs of their students.

Although not generalizable, the findings reported in this article have theoretical, empirical, and pedagogic implications. Theoretically, current epistemologic assumptions around washback as resulting from a structured relationship between teaching and testing do not offer helpful insights into how teachers may play an agentic role in the washback context. Our findings indicate that teachers’ pedagogic

practices are to a large extent influenced by examination, but these practices are not fully controlled by examination and datafication. We noted that teachers' professional sense of being teachers can also play a role within the negative washback context. This indicates the need for a broader theoretical understanding of washback, particularly looking beyond the deterministic testing–teaching causal hypothesis, and notably, considering other factors such as teachers' and students' agency and motivation in the washback context (Alderson and Wall 1993). As for empirical implications, the study indicates that understanding the existence of washback effect and categorizing the effect as positive or negative is not the end of the process. As illustrated by this article, washback research can also unpack how teachers respond to broader curricular goals under washback influence, and this is desirable particularly in the current context of datafication. The findings reported also provide pedagogic implications in relation to teachers' praxis. It seems that teachers' professional, ethical, emotional, and moral values are important in developing their agency in a data regime. From this perspective, apart from focusing on knowledge and skills, teacher education programmes can also emphasize these social-psychological and ethical components which can develop their disposition for a positive change. Also, in relation to Littlewood's (2009) concern about the administrative control of pedagogy in an accountability regime, this study indicates that teachers with an agentic disposition may be able to make a difference in the pedagogic domain. Finally, we emphasize that teacher agency in the washback context may play out in relation to both political pressure and pedagogic factors. For example, in this study teachers engaged with both the challenges of datafication (political pressure) and the curriculum–assessment disjuncture (pedagogic factor) and generated practices that were meaningful to their own context.

## Conclusion

This article has provided some refreshing insights into teachers' pedagogic practices, particularly in relation to how they exercised their agency by responding to broader curricular goals in the context of negative washback. Drawing on the insights generated in the study, the following recommendations may be useful for ELT practitioners in the context of curriculum–assessment disjuncture:

- In the context of the growing tensions between the preferred pedagogy (CLT) and an inconsistent testing regime (datafication), teachers may need to adopt a flexible identity. In other words, they may assume a hybrid identity by reflecting on ways in which they can respond to broader educational goals while protecting themselves from punitive measures imposed by those in power.
- As the findings in this article illustrate, the tension between the conflicting curricular and assessment goals may be minimized by creating a link between them at the classroom level. In this case, depending on their own context (Holliday 1994), language teachers need to rework these goals while planning lessons. This process will be useful for them not only to engage with and deconstruct macro-policies, but also to reflect on how they can better align the curriculum and testing in designing pedagogic tasks for their own classroom.

We emphasize that teachers' active engagement with the policy-in-practice and their endeavour to address the tension between curriculum and assessment amid growing datafication will contribute to the development of locally relevant pedagogic practices (Canagarajah 2005).

*Final version received July 2021*

## Funding

This research received support from an Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship, provided by the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia. We also acknowledge the support we received from the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) to make the article open access.

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