



# The washback effect of Iranian high school final examinations on students' test-taking and test-preparation strategies



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## ABSTRACT

During the past decades, the washback effect has attracted the attention of many testing specialists. Numerous studies attempted to explore the effects tests may have on teachers and teaching. There are, however, few empirical studies on the washback effect of tests on learners and learning. The current study investigated the effect of high school final examinations on students' test-taking and test-preparation strategy use. Analysis of the verbal protocols obtained from the high school learners revealed that these examinations made students employ some strategies which seemed to exert a negative influence on their learning by directing them toward a measurement-driven approach to learning. The strategies, nevertheless, were not all negative; some seemed to foster the students' mental and linguistic abilities.

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## Introduction

Tests are measurement instruments that are used for various purposes. However, the introduction of tests at every point into an educational system leads to many intentional or unintentional changes in the curriculum, especially in teaching and learning practices. This influence of testing on teaching and learning is called "the washback effect" in language testing (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Bailey, 1996; Gates, 1995; Hughes, 1989; Pan, 2009). Wall (1997, p. 291) defines washback as "any of the effects that a test may have on individuals, policies or practices, within the classroom, the school, the educational system or society as a whole" (cited in Hayes, 2003). Tests can narrow down learners' scope of learning by getting learners to study only those parts of the materials that are expected to appear on the tests. In addition, tests have an effect on teachers' methodological practices because they make teachers follow the "teach to test approach" (Chan, 2001, p. 39) in the classroom. The materials utilized will also be test-bound, and improving students' scores takes priority over accomplishing learning aims in the whole curriculum. However, the degree, nature, and scope of washback vary, based upon the

kinds of tests employed and the contexts in which the tests are introduced.

Because of the important role that washback plays in language testing, many researchers have conducted empirical studies to further elucidate the term and the interaction with its related concepts as well as to identify the effect of different tests, especially high-stakes tests, on objectives and goals, teaching and learning, teachers and learners, materials, and the whole curriculum. Although a large number of studies have been conducted on the washback effect of tests on teachers' teaching (Chen, 2002; Pizarro, 2010; Tabatabaei & Safikhani, 2011; Watanabe, 2004), few empirical studies are available in the literature concerning the influence of tests on learners' learning (Green, 2006; Pan & Newfield, 2012). Furthermore, taking the broad definition of washback into consideration, we can clearly perceive that tests affect not only learning products but also learning processes and strategies. A few studies are available in the literature on the effect of tests on students' test-taking and test-preparation strategies (Abdul Aziz, Abdul Razak, & Jamil, 2010; Lee, 2011; Loken, Radlinski, Crespi, Millet, & Cushing, 2004). However, none of these studies has explored the effect of Iranian high school final examinations on students' test-taking and test-preparation strategies.

High school final examinations in Iran are administered to students at the end of each academic year to identify whether or not they have learned the material taught in the classroom. They can be considered high-stakes tests as the decisions made based on

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the obtained scores are quite determining in the students' future. The present study intended to investigate the effects that Iranian high school final examinations can have on students' test-taking and test-preparation strategies. To achieve this end, five research questions were formulated:

1. What kind of test-taking strategies do Iranian high school students employ while taking the final examinations?
2. What kind of test-preparation strategies do Iranian high school students employ to get prepared for the final examinations?
3. What is the nature of washback effect of high school examinations on Iranian students' test-taking and test-preparation strategies?
4. Is there a statistically significant relationship between Iranian high school students' test-taking strategy use and their achievements on high school final examinations?
5. Is there a statistically significant relationship between students' test-preparation strategy use and their achievements on high school final examinations?

## Background

### *The concept of washback*

The effect of tests on an educational curriculum and its related elements, such as learning goals and objectives, teaching and learning materials, procedures, teaching and learning, teachers and learners is commonly known as washback. The concept is a controversial phenomenon that has recently drawn the attention of a great number of applied linguistics researchers. However, although researchers have commonly asserted the existence of washback in the field, they hold different views on the concept. Some narrow down the scope of washback to classrooms in which teachers and students (participants) interact with each other. Alderson and Wall (1993, p. 117) maintain that "tests are held to be powerful determiners of what happens in the classrooms." Bailey (1996, p. 259) views washback as "the influence of testing on teaching and learning." Messick (1996) also utilizes the concept to refer to "the extent to which the test influences language teachers and learners to do things that they would not necessarily otherwise do" (p. 243).

On the other hand, some others take a broader view of the concept and try to extend the scope of washback beyond the participants in the classrooms to materials, curricula, and the whole society. To Brown and Hudson (1998), washback is the effect that testing, assessment and assessment procedures have on curriculum. Hughes (1994) strives to extend the effect of washback beyond the classroom level to the educational context and the whole society. To illustrate the concept, Bachman and Palmer (1996) consider two levels, namely, micro- and macro-levels. The effect of tests on learners and learning processes as well as teachers and teaching methods are examples of test effects at the micro-level. At the macro-level, tests can affect the educational system and the whole society. Pearson (1988) views washback as "levers for change" (p. 101). Additionally, to Cohen (1994, p. 41), washback refers to "how assessment instruments affect educational practices and beliefs."

### *The nature of washback*

It is widely acknowledged that the washback phenomenon is inherently a neutral concept that has the potential to be either positive or negative (Bailey, 1996; Baker, 1989; Davies, 1990; Hughes, 2003; Saville, 2009). The bi-directionality of washback is clearly stated in Messick's (1996) definition of the concept: "the

extent to which a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not necessarily otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning" (p. 241). Tests can bring about desirable changes in teachers' instructions, lead to favorable decisions about learners, improve curricula, be in line with learners' learning needs rather than testing needs, and foster critical thinking in learners. However, tests can make teachers follow a teach-to-the test approach rather than adhering to learning principles and course objectives. They may also negatively influence learners by directing them to get accustomed to working only on what is tested and resorting to cramming. Additionally, the undesirable impacts of the tests go beyond the individuals to the education curriculum because they have the potential to narrow down course objectives and "distort the curriculum" (Vernon, 1956, p. 166).

### *Washback and language learner*

The washback effect of tests as an important and ongoing avenue of research has recently gained attention of testing specialists and researchers in applied linguistics. Hence, numerous researchers have delved into the phenomenon for different purposes. Some have directed their attention to explore the influence of the examinations at a macro-level on the materials (Cheng, 1997; Hawkey, 2006; Hayes, 2003; Pizarro, 2010) or on the whole educational curriculum (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng, 1999; Kiani, Alibakhshi, & Akbari, 2009; Otaka, 2008; Saif, 2006). A growing number of studies have also been conducted on washback on language teachers' teaching (Chen, 2002; Han, 2004; Mousavi & Amiri, 2011; Watanabe, 2004) and teachers' perspectives (Lewthwaite, 2007; Shim, 2009; Takagi, 2010) in recent decades.

However, not many empirical studies have been conducted to explore whether and how tests can affect learners. A few studies have been conducted on the effect of tests on the learners' attitudes and perspectives. For example, Han's (2004) study of the washback effects of College English Test–Spoken English Test (CET–SET) revealed that the test had a strong effect on learners' attitudes and perceptions with the majority of learners expressing positive attitudes toward CET–SET. Only a few learners perceived the test negatively. Lewthwaite's (2007) study of washback of the IELTS test showed that the students perceived that IELTS tasks have a positive effect on class-based writing skills because what is tested has a strong overlap with what is worked on in the class. In addition, Weili (2010) revealed that the new College English Test 4 Listening Comprehension Subtest (CET 4 LCS) yielded more positive than negative effects on learners' attitudes. Learners' attitude toward certain objective aspects of the listening subtest, such as test design, test formats reliability, and scoring criterion was positive.

A few studies have also targeted the washback effect on learners' learning and test-taking strategies. Green's (2007) study of the effect of IELTS test-preparation classes on students' writing scores revealed that dedicated test-preparation courses do not drastically improve learners' writing scores. In addition, Mousavi and Amiri (2011) employed observation and a questionnaire to investigate the washback of the TEFL MA University Entrance Exam in the Iranian context. The findings of the study revealed that the washback of TEFL MA UEE on learners' behaviors was weak because the test did not make learners practice previous exam papers or use test-preparation practices. Weili (2010) reported that the new CET 4 Listening Comprehension Subtest yielded negative washback on learners' behavior by having them apply test-taking strategies and enroll in test-preparation courses. Nikoopour and Farsani (2012) found that the Newly Developed English Major Test (NDEMT) of University Entrance Exam (UEE) made learners practice previous tests with the same format, apply test-taking strategies, and enroll in test-preparation courses so

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