
Washback Effects on English Language Learning and Teaching at Aden University

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Abstract

This quantitative study investigated the topic of washback, drawing language educators' and assessors' attention to the irreducible importance of feedback for learners. Besides discussing key concepts such as language testing, feedback, washback, and backwash, it investigated the washback effects on (a) developing students' language skills and motivation and (b) teachers' techniques and materials. Questionnaires were used to collect data from 42 English language teachers and 200 students in two departments of English and Translation at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, University of Aden in Yemen. Findings revealed positive effects of washback on the (a) development of students' language skills, abilities, and motivation and (b) teaching techniques and materials. The study generally showed that the faculty members, because of academic loads, only sometimes give their students individual feedback on areas of weakness, and they believe they should not shoulder this burden alone. This provides an amalgam of ideas for more effective teacher-made test washback, considering the teaching loads and training on tests and washback and their effects on learning and teaching English in an Arab context.

Keywords: Aden University, Assessment, Feedback, Motivation, Testing, Washback

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Introduction

Language assessment is generally defined as a collection of procedures for gathering information about students' performance and is often discussed with testing and evaluation. (Thippayacharoen et al., 2023). While assessment is concerned with the process and measures effectiveness, the evaluation focuses on the product that adds value to the process. In an assessment, the feedback is based on observation and positive and negative points (Albondoq, 2021; Herrington & Moran, 2009; Moqbel & Al-Kadi, 2023). Testing is a dynamic step to provide good feedback to teachers and students altogether. The feedback is based on observation, positive and negative points (Albondoq, 2021; Hattie & Timerley, 2007). Although it plays a vital role in English language education, it has been one of the areas that received little attention, particularly in the contexts of EFL and ESL (Albondoq, 2021; Thippayacharoen et al., 2023). With a few studies in the local context, it is treated superficially, particularly in English language assessment studies. Those interested in language testing and education would notice the need for more attention to this area regarding research and actual practices, and this shortage inspires conducting this study.

Within the assessment framework, terms such as washback, and backwash are increasingly discussed in the literature. Washback is a term used in applied linguistics today to refer to the effect of tests on language teaching and learning. Different authors defined the term washback in various ways. In Bailey's (1999) words, definitions of washback are nearly as numerous as the people who write about it" (p.3). Alderson and Wall (1993) pointed out that "the influence of testing on teaching is referred to as *backwash* in general education process. However, it has come to be known as washback in applied linguistics" (p.11). Washback and backwash are now interchangeably used in both EFL and ESL research as important parts of a test, and both may affect learners, teachers, and the educational system in general (Hughes, 2003). Washback is the preferred term in British applied linguistics (Cheng & Curtis, 2004).

Washback can be positive or negative, depending on how the test aligns with the curriculum, the instruction, and the educational goals. Although it is an essential topic for language teachers, learners, and testers, as it can influence language education's choices, behaviors, and outcomes, it has remained an ignorant area of research. Yin (2015) argued that previous studies on the washback effects greatly supported the empirical research. However, there were still some limitations to washback research. Fan et al. (2014) asserted that a review of previous washback studies revealed "the vast majority of them have been focused on large-scale high stakes language tests ...with few tapping into the washback of university-level language tests" (p.179).

Testing and Washback

Testing language can be considered an engine of the learning and teaching process. Weir (2005) and Shohamy (2013) focused on the 'what/trait' and 'how/method' of Language Testing (LT). Weir (2005) stated that language testing has two main components: the trait, which is the 'what' to be assessed, and the method, which is the 'how' to assess it. The trait is the construct of interest, and the method is the procedure or strategy used. From Weir's words, one can deduce that language testing focuses on the constructs that should be assessed and how these constructs should be assessed by using specific testing techniques.

Washback and examinations are strictly related to educational studies and language testing in particular (Hasanudin et al., 2023). Alderson and Wall (1993), a landmark and milestone in washback research, conducted a two-year investigation of the effects of implementing the revised English examination in Sri Lanka on teaching methodology. Their study is considered an unavoidable work in the *washback* history (Hoque, 2011). Based on Alderson and Wall's (1993) argument, "the quality of washback might be independent of the test quality" (p. 118). In other words, any test, whether considered good or bad, affects the educational system positively or negatively. Many researchers in language testing and washback asserted that washback is bi-directional: positive and negative. Alderson and Wall (1993) claimed that washback is the impact of a teaching test. This impact can be positive (beneficial) or negative (harmful). They added that tests can be powerful determiners, both positively and negatively, of what happens in the classroom" (p.41). In Alderson and Wall's

words, one can deduce that washback is often evaluated as positive or negative based on how much it helps or harms the teaching-learning process.

Many studies aimed to investigate the effect of tests on teaching techniques that teachers employ in classrooms. However, the literature has shown heterogeneous findings on the extent to which teaching methods/ techniques are affected by washback. Ahmed and Rao (2012) asserted the effect of a test on the teaching techniques that are used in classrooms. Besides, Alderson and Wall (1993) highlighted some ways which a test may affect teaching as in the following diagram. So, a washback can be considered as an important indicator of success or failure of *what* and *how* teachers teach.

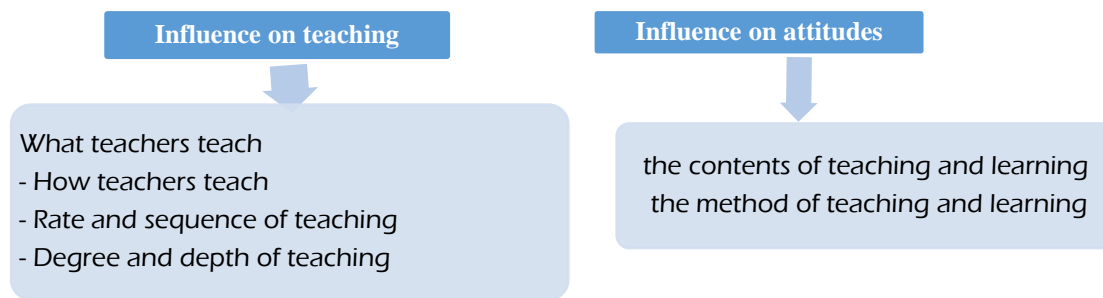


Figure 1. Influence of Washback on Teaching and Attitudes

Khan, Hassan & Ali (2023) contended that peer- and self-assessment in schools guide the teachers to make necessary adjustments to their teaching methods. Besides, selection of teaching materials used in classrooms by teachers might be influenced by washback. Furthermore, teachers may use additional self-made materials to provide students with more practical exercises that later could be useful for a good exam preparation. Hasanudin et al. (2023) argued for capturing students' attention by connecting course material with their interests. They added, "the subject meets their needs and the test appropriate to measure their achievement goals". Additionally, Watanabe (2000) noted that teachers tried to innovate during exam preparation classes using variety of self-made materials. The supplementary materials selected and used by teachers in classrooms could be authentic materials that teachers select from mass media. Accordingly, teachers' supplementary authentic materials may have two advantages: firstly, improving students' language skills and abilities and secondly promoting positive washback.

Washback and Learners' Motivation

Furthermore, students' motivation is one of the main areas that are affected by washback. Hasanudin et al. (2023) pointed out that a positive attitude affects students' development and brings students to get an optimal point on the test. However, few researches have been conducted to investigate the washback effect on students' learning, namely students' motivation. This view was supported by Buyukkeles (2016), saying, "despite an abundance of research into washback on teachers and teaching, there is a limited number of washback studies addressing the learning aspect (students)" (p.9). Supporting this view, Fan et al. (2014) pointed out that teachers' perceptions and practices studies (e.g., Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1997; Qi, 2005) argued that "investigations into washback on the learners and learning process are only piecemeal" (p.179).

Motivation has a profound effect on language learning success. It is the "driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process" (Dörnyei, 2005, p. 65). Accordingly, there are two types: *intrinsic motivation* and *extrinsic motivation*. Intrinsic motivation reflects behaviors performed because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable (Ryan & Deci, 2000, p.55). Thus, it might enhance language learning since it promotes autonomy. While extrinsic motivation describes behavior performed "as a

means to an end that is, to receive some extrinsic reward or to avoid punishment" (Dörnyei, 2005, p.27). This type of motivation is non-autonomous. So, students' learning may enhance because of external regulation.

Furthermore, Svinicki (2005) pointed out that students displayed two basic orientations toward their studies: grade orientation (working for grade) and learning orientation (working to learn) (p.77). Students who display grade orientation may focus on achieving achievements in language learning. While, students who display learning orientation may focus on mastering the task/skills. Besides, Pan (2009) and Lumley and Stoneman (2000) conducted their studies on washback, reporting that students were extrinsically motivated to learn.

In addition to the few studies that explored washback and its effects on English language learning, this study adds to the literature by examining washback in the Yemeni EFL context. It is relevant for teachers, students, and researchers. To the best knowledge of the researcher, this study is one of the few washback studies that focused on students' learning and motivation at the university level in Yemen. There is a need to ask: What are the washback effects of university-level teacher-made tests on: 1) the development of students' language skills, abilities and motivation and 2) teachers' teaching techniques and materials?

Method

This study is based on survey data to investigate the washback effects of university level teacher-made tests on students and teachers. The study adopted a quantitative research design using questionnaires for teachers and students as the primary tool for data collection. The context of the study was the Faculty of Languages and Translation (University of Aden, Yemen) and its two departments: English and Translation where the English language courses were taught for four semesters of the first two academic years. These courses are: listening, speaking, reading, writing and grammar.

Participants

In this study, the researcher relied on both kinds: target population sampling (student questionnaire) and wider population sampling (teacher questionnaire). Since the total number of English teachers in the two departments: English Department and Translation Department was 42, the researcher conducted the *wider population sampling* where all the participants were included in the study. 42 questionnaires were distributed to 42 teachers, of which 39 questionnaires were returned back to the researcher. In addition, the total number of the third-year students in the two departments is 477. So, the *target population sampling* was conducted to obtain a representative sample. Simple random sampling (randomization) was employed to give equal chances to all the participants of the study. To achieve this, the researcher depended on the attendance sheet from which (50) students were selected randomly from each group of the two departments: English and Translation. 200 copies of the questionnaires were distributed to 200 students and all were returned with three unanswered questionnaires; so, they were disregarded. Since the researcher is a member of the teaching staff at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, this facilitated the return of maximum number of the questionnaires.

Questionnaire Validity and Reliability

In this study, the questionnaires' items were largely based on theoretical considerations from relevant literature. In addition, the appropriateness/ relevance and the clarity of the items of both teacher questionnaire and student questionnaire were reviewed and assessed by seven Ph.D. holders. Based on the feedback of the reviewers, unclear items were reworded and the irrelevant items were deleted. Besides, some items were added. The questionnaires were comprised of two parts: (a) personal information, and (b) items related to the questions and objectives of the study. Likert-Style answers enabled quantitative data in the form of descriptive statistics. The two questionnaires were distributed to the participants hand by hand

for answering in the presence of the researcher to ensure clarity and comprehensibility. The internal reliabilities of the two questionnaires were calculated by using Cronbach's Alpha. The reliability coefficient of the teacher questionnaire was found to be strong positive correlation (0.823) Cronbach's Alpha, whereas the reliability of the student questionnaire was found to be strong positive correlation (0.705).

Results and Discussion

This section presents and discusses the results of the data analysis that were organized by providing answers to the two research questions:

Research Question 1: What is the washback effect of university level teacher-made tests on the development of students' language skills, abilities and motivation?

The results obtained from students' questionnaire are outlined below. The pie chart below, show that teacher-made tests had positive washback (65.35%) "agree" on the development of students' language skills and abilities and positive washback (73.58%) "agree" on students' motivation.

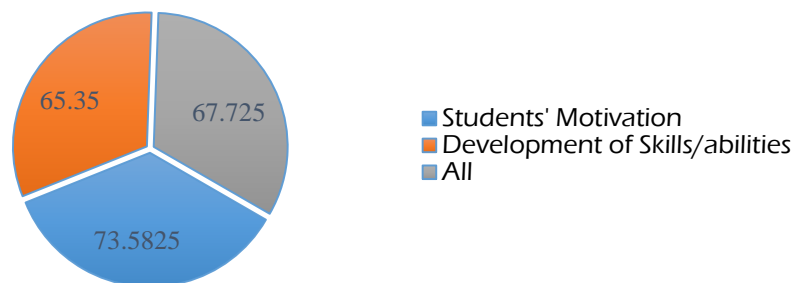


Figure 2. Results Obtained from Student Questionnaire

Listening Skill Tests

Results obtained from student questionnaire revealed that 129 (52.23%) of the students expressed their agreement to that studying for listening tests in the last two academic years (4 semesters) helped them to develop their listening skill, 22 (8.91%) responded "strongly agree", 73(29.55%) responded "disagree" while 23 (9.3%) responded "strongly disagree". From the result, above, one may infer that preparation for a listening test enables students to have enough exposure to develop their listening skill. Yin (2015) pointed out that the language exposure outside of the classroom like television, internet, radio, music and movie watching help students develop their listening skills (p.18). Therefore, a good incorporation among the parties in language preparation test highly increase the positive washback (Rahmatillah et al., 2021). Accordingly, studying for listening skill test may encourage students to have enough exposure.

Reading Skill Tests

Results obtained from student questionnaire revealed that 125 (50.61%) of the students expressed their agreement to that studying for reading tests in the last two academic years (4 semesters) helped them to develop their reading skill, 38 (15.38%) responded "strongly agree", 60 (24.29%) while 24 (9.72%) expressed their disagreement. This indicates that preparation for a reading test enables students to have enough exposure to develop their reading skill. Studying for tests may encourage students to read more which may develop their reading skills.

Writing Skill Tests

Results obtained from student questionnaire revealed that 131 (53.04%) of the students expressed their agreement to that studying for writing tests in the last two academic years (4 semesters) helped them to develop their writing skill, 47 (19.03%) responded "strongly agree", 52 (21.05%) responded "disagree" and while 17 (6.88%) responded "strongly disagree". From the result above, preparation for writing tests seemed to encourage students to do additional writing skill exercises that may help them to develop their writing skills. Kartawijaya (2018) asserted that the sufficient writing practices help students develop their writing skills effectively (p.152).

Grammar

Results obtained from student questionnaire revealed that 125 (50.61%) of the students expressed their agreement to that studying for grammar tests in the last two academic years (4 semesters) helped them to develop their grammar skill, 42 (17.00%) responded "strongly agree", 65 (26.32%) responded "disagree" Whereas 15 (6.07%) responded "strongly disagree". From the result above, it indicates that preparation for grammar tests may encourage students to do additional practical exercises of the covered grammatical topics. Watanabe (2000) notes that teachers tried to innovate during exam preparation by using variety of self-made materials (p.44). The supplementary materials that selected and used by teachers in classrooms could be authentic materials that teachers select from mass media. Accordingly, teachers' supplementary authentic materials may have two advantages: improving students' language skills and abilities and promoting positive washback. Hattie and Timperley (2007) assert that feedback is one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement. (p. 81).

Writing Notes on Students' Test Papers

Teachers never/ rarely write notes on students' test papers. 134 (54.25%) responded "never" and 56 (22.67%) responded "rarely", 53 (21.46%) responded "sometimes" while 4 (1.62%) responded "always". One possible explanation is that teachers neglected the importance of writing notes on students' test papers and the importance of teachers' feedback on the development of students' language skills and abilities. Chinda et al. (2022) confirmed that "the students expressed issues regarding the level of communication with the teacher and the amount and clarity of feedback they received" (p.538). Similarly, Khan et al. (2023) emphasized the important role that feedback plays in improving student learning. However, little is known about how students understand and experience feedback within the classroom settings. Brown (2000) asserted that after conducting a test, teachers should give students feedback on areas they are weak in to help them to be improved in the future. Therefore, the improvement of the students' language skills and abilities reflects the positive effect of a test on students' progress (p.408). Additionally, Baily (1996) cited in Aftab et.al (2014) pointed out that providing students with good feedback of test results is one of the main aspects to ensure positive washback since it helps students to improve their skills and abilities.

Washback on Students' Motivation

The obtained results demonstrates that 102 (41.30%) of the students responded "sometimes" use supplementary materials in addition to teachers' materials to develop their language skills, 45 (18.22%) responded "always", 46 (18.62%) responded "rarely" while 54 (21.86%) responded 'never'. This result revealed that teacher-made tests had positive washback on students in that they motivate them to use supplementary materials in addition to teachers' materials to develop their language skills. Thus, it might enhance language learning since it promotes autonomous that can be explicitly seen via using students some supplementary materials in addition to teachers' materials to develop their language skills. That means, teacher-made tests encourage students' intrinsic motivation. This type of motivation is inherently interesting/enjoyable and it promotes autonomous.

Accordingly, it might not only enhance language learning (Rayan & Deci, 2000), but also giving positive feedback during the language preparation class can reduce their frustration when taking the test (Papakammenou, 2018). So, it seems that teacher-made tests might encourage students' extrinsic motivation that describes behavior performed as a mean to receive some extrinsic reward or to avoid punishment (Dörnyei, 2005). Regarding the mean difference among the participants of the study at the two departments: English and Translation was ($\text{sig}=0.951$). Table 1 below, shows that there was no difference (the mean difference significant at the .05 level) among the participants of the study with respect to the positive washback of teacher-made tests on students' motivation. This indicated that teacher-made tests worked as a vital assessment method that motivated students to learn effectively.

Table 1. Mean difference among the participants of the study

| | Department | Mean | SD | df | T | Sig. (2tailed) |
|----------------------|-------------|------|--------|-----|-------|----------------|
| Students' Motivation | Translation | 2.94 | .43147 | 245 | -.061 | .951 |
| | English | 2.94 | .49807 | | | |

Research Question 2: What is the washback effect of university level teacher-made tests on teachers' teaching techniques and teaching materials?

The results obtained from the teacher's questionnaire are outlined herewith. The results showed that most of the teachers expressed their agreement to the effectiveness of the test on teaching techniques that they use in the class. 18 (46.15%) responded "agree", 11 (28.21%) responded "strongly agree", 9 (23.08%) responded "disagree" while only one (2.56%) responded "strongly disagree". This result revealed that teacher-made tests had positive washback on teachers in giving them good feedback on the effectiveness of the teaching techniques they used in the class. In support of this, Athiworakun and Adunyarittigun (2022) asserted that the teachers were aware of the washback effects of testing on teaching. Aftab, et.al (2014) proposed a conceptual washback model in which teaching methodology was one of the main aspects that affected by washback.

Similarly, Bachman (1990) asserted that a test played an important role in providing teachers with good feedback on the teaching techniques they used in classrooms (p50). In the same vein, Ahmed and Rao (2012) asserted that there was an effect for the test on the teaching methods used in classrooms. When a teacher assessed the students s/he measured the extent useful of the teaching techniques in achieving course objectives. Although the obtained result of tests might give good feedback to teachers on the effectiveness of the used teaching technique in classroom.

Washback of Teachers' Teaching Materials

The results showed that most of the teachers expressed their agreement to the effectiveness of the test on teaching materials that they use in the class. 17 (43.59%) responded "strongly agree" and 13 (33.33%) responded "agree", 9 (23.08%) responded "disagree" while no response for "strongly disagree". This result revealed that teacher-made tests had a positive washback on teachers. This showed that a deep look of the obtained results of the teacher-made tests might help teachers to get good feedback on the effectiveness of the teaching materials they used in the class. Watanabe (2000) noted that teachers tried to innovate during exam preparation classes using variety of self-made materials. The supplementary materials selected and used by teachers in classrooms could be authentic that teachers select from mass media. Accordingly, teachers' supplementary authentic materials may have two advantages: improving students' language skills and abilities and promoting positive washback. Lam (1995) conducted a washback study that aimed to investigate textbook washback. The finding of the study revealed that there was washback on teaching materials. This means that authenticity in

selection of teaching materials seem to play a vital role in promoting positive washback due to producing meaningful learning act.

Before moving forward to the conclusion, it is important to reiterate that findings of this study are related to washback in the traditional learning and teaching systems. For the new generations who have the opportunities for modern digitized learning environment, the situation may be different in terms of washback effects. Technology which has created new assessment tools and techniques (Herrington & Moran, 2009; Moqbel & Al-Kadi, 2023) implies a change in the washback results if a similar study conducted in a technology-enriched learning context. This opens a new area of further investigation that would tempt other researchers to conducted their research project in the Yemeni EFL context. This provides an amalgam of ideas for teachers to position themselves as teachers open to new ideas in TEFL. It consolidates support for teachers' current efforts and further research to reconsider language testing and assessment in teacher preparation programs and their washback more seriously.

Conclusion

This study reveals the vital role of testing in language learning and teaching at university level. It showed a positive washback of teacher-made tests on the development of students' language skills, abilities and motivation and teachers' teaching techniques and materials. However, (67%) teachers rarely gave the students feedback on the areas they sowed weak in to help them improve in the future. In addition, the study underscores the importance of drawing the attention to the teacher-training program at the Faculties of Education, University of Aden to reconsider the place of language testing and assessment in its teacher preparation program since the Department of English curriculum does not include a testing and assessment. The study may be useful since it is one of the few washback studies that focused on students' learning and motivation at university-level. However, further studies should be carried out on issues like washback of teacher-made achievement tests on the practices of teachers in classrooms and the impact of using test-taking strategies on promoting positive washback.

Disclosure Statement:

I (the author of this paper) hereby declare that research ethics and citing principles have been considered in all the stages of this paper. Thus, I take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of dispute.

Ethics Statement

I confirm that the manuscript has been created by the author and not an AI tool/Large Language Model (LLM). I am fully responsible for the content of the manuscript and am thus liable for any breach of publication ethics.

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