
Washback in English Education: Insights from Libyan Ninth Graders

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Abstract

Testing is a crucial aspect of language teaching and learning, as it helps determine a learner's proficiency. This study aims to identify the effects of ninth-grade students' final examinations on their learning and to suggest procedures for both teachers and students to mitigate negative washback. Data were collected using a test and a questionnaire, and the results were analyzed quantitatively. The findings showed that students significantly improved their scores from the pretest to the post-test (final test). However, they received low scores on the final test due to the time gap between the preparation course and the final test, leading to a loss of motivation and intention. Additionally, most students agreed that thorough preparation before the final examination helped them better understand the test techniques and format. The researcher compared the students' pretest and post-test results with their final test scores, revealing considerable improvement during the preparation course but negative washback in the final test. Based on these results, the study provides suggestions for further research and implications for language educators in Libya and beyond..

Keywords: English Education, Exam, Libya, washback

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Introduction

The terms “washback” and “backwash” have recently become common in the field of learning and teaching, and some have used them interchangeably. Nevertheless, Cheng and Curtis (2004) referred to “washback” as the preferred term in British applied linguistics. Washback is defined as the effect of testing on teaching and learning. Any effect must be preceded by a cause, and hence, the cause of backwash is testing. Washback can be beneficial or harmful, depending on the test. Good tests should have a positive influence, while poor tests undoubtedly affect teaching and learning negatively (Albondoq, 2023). Fulcher and Davidson (2007) indicate that “backwash refers to the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things that they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning” (p. 26).

Most definitions of washback focus on the classroom, allowing for both accidental and intentional effects, and leave open the question of whether washback is positive or negative. In relation to curriculum, reports on the effects of washback are contradictory (Albondoq, 2023). Alderson and Wall (1993) conclude from their Sri Lanka study that “the examination has had a demonstrable effect on the content of language lessons” (pp. 126-127). This effect was the narrowing of the curriculum to those areas most likely to be tested.

Many factors, together or apart, can create beneficial backwash. These include teachers who follow suitable teaching and testing methodologies for their students, a rich and easy-to-digest syllabus on which a test is built, a well-conditioned environment for language testing, and a well-designed test schedule. If students are tested under such circumstances, the tests are considered valid. In their simple definition, “backwash” or “washback” refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning (e.g., Albondoq, 2023; Alderson & Wall, 1993; Hughes, 1989). However, explanations of the term “washback” can be found throughout published research and literature on language testing with various meanings, revealing differences in scope and intentionality.

Washback in English Learning and Teaching

Washback, also known as backwash, refers to the influence that testing has on teaching and learning. This concept has been a focal point in language assessment research since Hughes (1989) highlighted its significance in his seminal work, *Testing for Language Teachers* (Green, 2013). Washback can be positive or negative, depending on whether the test promotes beneficial educational practices or leads to undesirable teaching methods. Positive washback occurs when a test encourages effective teaching and learning practices. For instance, well-designed language tests can motivate students to engage deeply with the material and help teachers align their instruction with educational goals². Conversely, negative washback happens when the test leads to teaching to the test, where instruction is narrowly focused on test content at the expense of broader educational objectives.

There are factors that influence the nature and extent of washback. These include the test stakes, the alignment between test content and curriculum, and the perceptions of teachers and students (Green, 2013). High-stakes tests, such as final examinations, often have a more pronounced washback effect because of the significant consequences associated with test performance. Research has shown that washback effects vary across different educational contexts (Chan, 2020). In Libya, the teaching of English has experienced fluctuations due to political and social changes. Cancelling English from school curricula during certain periods has impacted the quality and consistency of English education (Tsgari, D., Cheng, L. (2017). Understanding the specific context of Libyan ninth graders is crucial for examining how washback manifests in this setting.

Testing

Foucault (1979) “describes tests as the most powerful and efficient tool through which society imposes discipline” (pp. 184-185). In *Discipline and Punish* he points to the specific features that enable tests to become so powerful. They are the ability to observe, perform surveillance, quantify, classify, normalize and judge. He states that the examination uses

hierarchical observation and normalizing judgment to classify, qualify, and punish individuals. It creates visibility that differentiates and judges them, making it a ritualized mechanism of discipline. This process combines power and experimentation, force and truth, subjecting individuals and objectifying them.

The power and authority of tests enable policymakers to use them as effective tools for controlling educational systems and prescribing the behaviour of those who are affected by their results administrators, teachers and students. Shohamy (2001) states that that policy makers use tests to control educational systems, curricula, and teaching methods. Principals use tests to motivate teachers, and teachers use them to ensure students' study. School-wide exams enforce learning, while classroom tests and quizzes maintain discipline and motivate students.

Thus, tests initially designed to provide information on achievement or to select suitable candidates for jobs have become devices for controlling and manipulating educational systems. Nevertheless, Ellis (1984:312) has emphasized that language testing is a complex phenomenon. There are several factors and procedures have to be taken into account in developing and applying tests. He (ibid) says "Tests may be compiled by individual teachers, or by institutions. Testees exhibit different characteristics. And decisions about individuals have been taken on the basis of test results".

Previous Studies

Lumley and Stoneman (2000) studied teachers' and students' reactions to a learning package for a test newly introduced at the tertiary level in Hong Kong and concluded that there is a mismatch between teachers' and students' attitudes towards the Learning Package. Teachers see it as a valuable teaching tool with activities beyond test preparation, while students focus mainly on familiarizing themselves with the test format and show little interest in broader learning strategies and performance improvement suggestions.

Cheng (1998) mentions that students show mixed feelings towards the exam itself, recognizing that the exam made them work to achieve good scores but also thinking that exams were not an accurate reflection of all aspects of their study. He concludes that the washback effect of this exam seems limited, as it does not appear to have a fundamental impact on students' learning. For example, students' perceptions of their motivation to learn English and their learning strategies remain largely unchanged.

Struyven et al. (2002) conclude that "students' perceptions about conventional and alternative assessment can equip us with valuable ideas and interesting tip-offs to bring this deep conceptual learning into practice" (p. 26). Within conventional assessment practices, namely multiple-choice and essay writing examinations, students perceive the multiple-choice format as more favorable than constructed response essay items. Students' perceptions of the perceived difficulty, lower anxiety, complexity, and higher success expectancy give preference to this examination format.

Yi-Ching Pan (2009) states that teachers should consider two key points: First, align tests with what is taught by using direct testing and ensuring students are familiar with the test. Second, be aware that focusing on tests can lead to teaching discrete language points rather than the communicative skills needed in real life.

English for Libya

There were two prototypical final tests in which the researcher handed to the ninth-grade students, thirty-six students. All the students have been given the same subjects and lessons of the English for Libya curriculum according how the lessons are going to be in the final test. For the success of teaching materials in preparatory stage, it is essential for the course designers to take into account the students' age, level, and take an interest in their cognitive, linguistic and emotional aspect, because this will generate a essential role in creating suitable material for them. As Richards (2001) argues that learners are central to curriculum development, so gathering detailed information about them is crucial. Young learners, who enjoy activities like playing and drawing, struggle with abstract concepts like grammar (p.

101). Moreover, learners in non-English surroundings learn English as one of other school subjects and they have no chance to use the language outside school, Pinter (2006) declares that in many parts of the world, children learn English as just another school subject, like math or science, rather than to integrate into an English-speaking environment or make new friends (p. 32).

It is important for the course designer to take into account these characteristics when designing course books for young learners. Therefore, the purpose of the study paid special attention to learning in view of the fact that most washback studies have targeted on teaching and ignored learning. It then was designed to explore how tests of language learning may impact young learners.

Objectives and research questions

This research seeks to identify some effects of the ninth-grade students' final examination on their teaching and learning. It also aims to suggest some procedures for the students to overcome the negative washback. In light of these objectives, the researchers tried to answer the following questions:

1. What type of washback does the ninth-grade final examination have on teaching?
2. What are the appropriate ways to reduce or eliminate the negative washback?

Method

The study aimed to investigate the washback effects of the final English test on ninth-grade students and to identify their views regarding the test. To achieve this, a quantitative research method was employed, as it is well-suited for the nature of this investigation, allowing for the systematic collection and analysis of numerical data. By employing a quantitative research method, the study was able to systematically investigate the washback effects of the final English test on ninth-grade students. The use of questionnaires and tests provided a robust framework for collecting and analyzing data, ultimately leading to an understanding of the students' views and experiences related to the test.

Participants

The study involved 200 ninth-grade students from various schools across Libya. The age range of the participants was between 14 and 15 years. To ensure that the sample was representative of the broader population, a stratified random sampling technique was employed. The sample size was determined based on statistical considerations to ensure sufficient power for detecting significant effects and trends. A larger sample size enhances the reliability and validity of the study findings, allowing for more robust conclusions to be drawn. The demographic characteristics of the sample were carefully recorded to provide a detailed understanding of the participants. This included information on age, gender, geographic location, and type of school attended. Such detailed demographic data allowed for a nuanced analysis of the washback effects of the final English test across different subgroups.

Data Collection

Two sets of data collection were administered: a test and a questionnaire. The test was an achievement test. Brown and Knight (1994) describe an achievement test as "an attainment or summative test, devised to measure how much of a language the learner has learned concerning a particular course of study or project of instruction, e.g., end-of-year tests designed to show mastery of a language" (p. 259). An achievement test might include listening or writing comprehension based on specific situational dialogues in a textbook. The test was prepared for both a pre-test and a post-test. Both tests, provided by the Ministry of Education, consisted of forty-eight questions, including twenty true/false statements, twenty multiple-choice questions, and eight matching items, mirroring the final test administered to ninth-grade students by the Ministry of Education. The questionnaire aimed to explore students' perceptions of the English test, their study habits, and their motivation. Additionally, a teacher questionnaire was designed to investigate instructional practices, perceptions of the

test, and observed student behaviors. The questionnaires were distributed to students and teachers at the beginning of the academic year. Responses were collected and analyzed to identify common themes and patterns.

Procedures

In order to reduce or eliminate the effect of tests on pupils' performance the researcher decided to conduct a preparation course for the pupils to give an idea about the techniques of the final tests, the questions that might be included in the final tests of the Libyan ministry of education. The course included thirty-six pupils, it lasts for about one month before the end of the year, during this month the pre-test was given to the pupils and post-test that was before one week at the end of the year, which gave them background about how the final test will look like and before a week the end of the year a post-test has been given to them.

The problem the researcher faced was that pupils were only worried about the exam and how would it be (This is what really is washback). A month before the final exam, the pupils were tested by the researcher to measure their learning level, which was a reflection of his teaching level (pre-test) and to see whether if they were ready to take the final test or not. Another purpose was to test their background of the syllabus they were taught, and to see how testing would affect their learning. He told them to prepare for their progress test a week before they were tested.

During the test, pupils were not really worried as they have already known that it is not a formal test. Almost all the previous final tests of ninth grade students focus on memorizing dates, names of person rather than focusing on language skills. Twenty true and false statements, multiple-choice and eight matches. In the two pretest and post-test which prototypical the Ministry of Education tests, the time is one hour and a half, actually they all have done it before the time finished, they have been told to revise their answers until it was time. The pupils said that it was very easy and answerable.

After correcting their papers, as previously expected- their performance was inadequate, and hence, they needed more practice. Needing to work more to improve them and prepare them for the final test.

Results and Discussion

The quantitative data from the questionnaires and tests were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics to identify trends and correlations. The study aimed to understand the washback effects of the final English test administered by the Ministry of Education of Libya and the obstacles encountered by pupils in their classes. Thirty-three ninth-grade students participated in the study, with two students absent during the questionnaire distribution. The goal was to pinpoint the problems and actual attitudes of the students towards the exam techniques, as they are the ones being tested, not the teachers.

Table 1. Weekly Study Hours

Study Hours	Number of Students
>12 Hours	4
9-12 Hours	3
5-8 Hours	12
<5 Hours	14

As for the study hours, four students dedicated more than 12 hours per week to studying, three students studied for 9-12 hours, twelve students studied for 5-8 hours, and fourteen students studied for less than five hours per week.

Regarding the nervousness during test preparation, out of the 33 students, two reported feeling nervous about the test preparation starting from the previous year. Approximately 30.3% of the students began feeling nervous immediately when the course started, while three students felt nervous a few months after the course began. This indicates a negative washback effect due to the anxiety associated with the test.

As for self-Assessment of English proficiency, nineteen students considered themselves quite good in English, eight students rated themselves as very good, and five students felt they were not proficient in English. This suggests that previous years of study did not sufficiently build students' confidence in their English language abilities.

Concerning confidence in passing the exam, fifty-eight per cent (19 students) were confident they would pass the exam. Surprisingly, two students were completely unsure about passing. This indicates that despite poor teaching and learning tools, the learning process was somewhat effective.

Table 2. Interest in the Preparation Course

Interest Level	Number of Students
Interesting	27
To a large extent	6
Not interesting	0

Interest in the Preparation Course

The study revealed that a significant majority of students found the preparation course both interesting and beneficial for their understanding of the material. Specifically, twenty-seven students reported that the course helped them understand the material better, while six students found it interesting to a large extent. None of the students found the course uninteresting, indicating a positive reception. This suggests that the course effectively engaged students by focusing on the test format and techniques, providing practical insights and skills directly applicable to their final examination. The engaging nature of the course likely fostered a supportive learning environment, enhancing students' motivation and confidence. Overall, the high level of interest and perceived helpfulness highlights the importance of well-structured instructional programs.

Motivation Towards the Exam

A significant number of students were motivated to study hard and pass the exam. Specifically, twenty-six students reported feeling motivated to put in the necessary effort to succeed. They reported being motivated to study hard and pass the exam, while three were not motivated. Eighteen students felt confident because they had acquired the necessary skills to pass. This indicates that the preparation course was effective in reducing negative washback. However, many students lost motivation due to repeated exams mandated by the Ministry of Education, leading to test fatigue and decreased engagement. Balancing rigorous assessment with strategies to maintain student motivation is crucial. Educators should create a supportive learning environment that fosters intrinsic motivation and a love for learning, rather than solely focusing on test performance.

Sources of Nervousness

Students identified four main sources of nervousness: teachers, parents, the test itself, and preparation for the test. Ten students reported that their parents made them nervous, likely due to high expectations and pressure to perform well. Twenty-four students were anxious about the test itself, reflecting the high stakes and perceived difficulty of the exam. Nine students were stressed by the preparation process, which may involve intensive study sessions and a focus on test-specific strategies. This widespread nervousness indicates a significant negative washback effect, where the pressure of the test adversely impacts students' emotional well-being and potentially their performance.

Importance of the Test

All students (100%) believed that the final examination at the end of the year was important, as it demonstrated their achievements. This unanimous perception underscores the significant washback effect of the test, highlighting its influence on both teaching practices and students' learning experiences throughout the academic year. The importance placed on

the test likely drives both students and teachers to prioritize test preparation, sometimes at the expense of broader educational goals. This focus on the final exam can shape the entire curriculum and instructional methods, emphasizing test-related content and skills.

Focus on Language Skills

All thirty-three students agreed that they focused on grammar, reading, and vocabulary during the course and test preparation. Notably, listening skills were not included in the final tests from 2009 to 2018. This focus on specific language skills reflects the test's influence on the curriculum, potentially narrowing the scope of language instruction. By concentrating on grammar, reading, and vocabulary, students may miss out on developing other essential language skills, such as listening and speaking, which are crucial for comprehensive language proficiency.

Materials Used for Test Preparation

Due to the lack of cassettes, computers, and authentic materials, students relied on practice tests in the textbook for their preparation. This reliance on limited resources suggests that the preparation process was constrained, potentially affecting the comprehensiveness and quality of students' learning experiences. The absence of diverse and authentic materials may limit students' exposure to real-world language use, thereby restricting their ability to apply language skills in practical contexts. The heavy dependence on practice tests also indicates a narrow focus on test-taking strategies rather than holistic language learning.

Attitudes Towards the Test

Approximately 84.8% (28 students) had a positive attitude towards the final test based on their pretest and post-test experiences. This positive attitude suggests that the students felt adequately prepared and confident in their abilities. However, they were less positive about the period between the final test and the preparation course, as well as the repeated exams mandated by the Ministry of Education. These factors diminished their motivation and retention of course material, as the repetitive nature of the exams likely led to test fatigue and decreased engagement. The remaining students expressed neutral views, indicating a mixed overall perception of the testing process and its impact on their learning.

Statements About the Final Exam

Students agreed that passing the test without a preparation course was difficult. The final exam compelled them to study harder, and they believed that with less rigorous preparation, they could still pass the exam. They also valued the feedback received during the preparation course.

Generally, it is found that the students have significantly outscored their pretest scores by the post-test (the final test) as shown in the table, but they got low scores in the final test due to the time between the final test and the preparation course and they lose their motivation and lose intention. Besides, most of the students agree on that a good preparation before the final examination helped them more in understanding the techniques of the final test and comprehend more better how the format of the final test will be. Moreover, the researcher has compared the results of the students in the pretest and post-test with their final test. Notably, the results showed a considerable improvement between the pretest and post-test during the preparation course and negative washback in the final test. The results of the final test for the students have confirmed a negative washback, for the reason that less marks the pupils obtained. The study provided some implications of washback are significant for both teaching and learning. Teachers may alter their instructional strategies to better prepare students for tests, which can either enhance or hinder educational outcomes. For students, the nature of the test can influence their motivation, study habits, and overall engagement with the subject matter (Chan, 2020).

Conclusion

This study was undertaken to determine the effectiveness of the final test and its preparation for ninth-grade learners. After almost months of instructions, the results were encouraging for teachers who want to implement a good preparation course for exams for their pupils and also for any other subjects. Practically, the study lasted for six months and the duration of the class was forty-five minutes a day for five days a week yielding significant statistical and educational differences. Much more experiments need to be undertaken to show how much the preparation for exams could be used to present all the subjects of the ninth-grade students. In addition, studies are needed to determine how much instructional time needs to be given the preparation for tests to lessen the negative washback to achieve optimal results. The study suggests that the washback of tests is vital in language teaching and learning. Moreover, without good preparation for this final test, no learner can pass the final test with its considerable techniques. Besides, the negligence of this phenomenon in previous decades has caused serious problems in classrooms for L2 students and teachers as well. The study suggests that curriculum designers should simplify topics for exams, consider learners' age, level, and cultural background, and account for classroom time and class size. They should also order language skills according to learners' needs and the final test. The Ministry of Education should provide schools with modern teaching tools and conduct annual teacher training workshops. Teachers should focus on relevant lessons, conduct progress tests after each unit, prepare thoroughly for tests, and use prototype tests to help students prepare for finals.

Disclosure Statement:

I hereby declare that research ethics and citing principles have been considered in all stages of this paper. I take full responsibility for the content of the paper in case of a dispute. I confirm that the manuscript was created by the authors and not an AI tool/large language model (LLM).

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