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## **Problematizing High School Certificate Exam in Pakistan: A Washback Perspective**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper describes and evaluates the Higher-Secondary School Certificate (HSC) exam in Pakistan that has been in place in its present form for more than thirty years. The author recounts her experience as a teacher of English in a representative high school in Pakistan and, reflecting on the impact of high school public exam, she argues that the exam has a negative washback effect. She then presents a detailed survey of washback literature, provides a description of the context and the test, and analyzes the current testing situation in Pakistan. It is concluded that the exam has had a widespread washback both at the individual and societal level needing serious attention in view of its broader educational and social implications.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

It was the second week of the new academic year and my first week as a high school teacher of English. I was hurrying toward the classroom for my second English class in grade twelve. I was very enthusiastic because I was going to face the challenge of teaching a class as large as 120 students. I had worked hard on my lesson plan and was soon going to see whether it would work. But as I entered the classroom, I was shocked to see only fifteen students sitting there. Having finished calling the roll, I asked why the rest of the class was not there. What they told me was a real eye-opener for me: most students attend classes only on the days when they have labs scheduled. I was dealing with a class of pre-engineering science group students who had labs only on two days of the week and so they would show up on those two days for other classes too. They preferred to study at home in the mornings because in the afternoons they had to attend private coaching classes for the preparation of exams. Those fifteen students were there because they were not taking any exam-preparation classes in the afternoons and thought they needed to come to school. This made me realize for the first time how the examination system in Pakistan affected the education in general and teaching and learning of English in particular.

My own observation with regard to the impact of tests on teaching and learning has not been limited to this incident. Having worked in two different educational systems (matriculation and O'Level<sup>1</sup>) in Karachi, Pakistan, I have noticed a marked difference in the ways English is taught and learned in schools in these different systems. In addition to some brief descriptions of

teaching and learning situation in Pakistani schools (Mansoor, 2005; Rahman, 2002), Shamim (1993, 2006) and Shamim and Allen (2000, cited in Shamim, 2008), the only in-depth classroom studies in schools and at higher education level, argue that the ways in which English is taught in the classrooms depends greatly on the kind of tests used in assessing the student achievement in English.

The impact of tests or examination system on the teaching and learning has been widely discussed in the field of education (Morris, 1990; Smith, 1991; Shepard, 1993; Vallette, 1994). Due to their wide use, tests, particularly high-stakes tests, may exert an influence on teachers and students with an associated impact on what happens in classrooms (Morris, 1990). The phenomenon that tests influence what and how teachers teach and students learn is described as the washback effect (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Hugh (2003) defined washback as “a part of the impact a test may have on learners and teachers, on educational systems in general, and on society at large” (p. 53). For decades now, scholars have debated the potential impact of tests. Although some scholars have also considered that tests have the potential to bring about a favorable impact on teaching and learning (e.g., Alderson, 1986; Bailey, 1996; Wall, 2000), Alderson and Banerjee’s (2001) review article noted that most researchers believe that tests induce deleterious effects. However, in a country where the debate on the importance of learning English as a second language is far from over, the issue of test impact or washback in the teaching/learning gets overlooked.

Since the inception of Pakistan, English has been considered an important language. It is the language of technology, business and employment which is necessary for communication across cultures. In Pakistani society, English has always been the language of power and a virtual class marker (Rehman, 1996, 2002). The terms “Urdu-medium” and “English-medium” are used commonly to identify an individual’s social and educational status. Interviews for high-paying jobs are usually conducted in English. Similarly, its international primacy makes proficiency in English arguably the most fundamental advantage for Pakistani youth seeking attractive employment abroad and in Pakistan. English proficiency also helps an individual rise in the armed forces and civil service. Therefore, the learning of English is mandatory from first to twelfth grade.

According to Pinter (2006), the purpose of introducing a language program depends on certain factors such as the language setting (which is affected by a number of ‘contextual variables’ like the political influence and the views of education ministry of a given country), educational frameworks, status of English and attitudes toward it. The following points rationalize the status of English as a compulsory subject in the curriculum of grade one to undergraduate level in Pakistan:

- English being the language of international communication is also a means to higher education and better career opportunities.
- English, which was used as a tool in power politics in the society, should be used to eliminate discrimination among the classes.
- Since cognitive, ethical and social development are part of language development, the development of the language which is to become the language of communication, higher learning and better career options must start early.

In view of its significance, as outlined above, English has ever since been taught and students' competence in it been tested at all levels. Being an English teacher, what bothers me the most about the English language teaching situation in Pakistan is that we do not realize how important assessment has been in shaping the current teaching and learning situation there. I consider the situation one of a serious case of negative washback of the examination system and this paper will briefly discuss why I think so. I will first discuss what washback studies in ESL have revealed and then present my analysis of the situation. The purpose of this study is to articulate my concerns about an important dimension of educational system that to this day has been overlooked in Pakistan and, further, to call the attention of the concerned to what is happening in the classrooms as a result of test impact. I conclude, in this paper, that the negative washback of the examination system is one of the reasons why, in spite of following a twelve-year course of study in English as a second language, the graduates of public high schools in Pakistan fail to exhibit basic English proficiency.

### THE WASHBACK PERSPECTIVE

It has been frequently and vehemently asserted in assessment literature that tests exert a powerful influence on language learners who are preparing to take these exams, and on the teachers who try to help them prepare. Recent studies (e.g., Cheng and Watanabe, 2004) suggest that the most important question is how and why washback is brought about and how we can collect reliable evidence to understand its nature (Cain, 2005). However, of first and foremost importance for our understanding of the issues beforehand is to define *washback*. The impact of test on teaching and learning is termed as 'washback' and has been defined in numerous ways in the published research and literature on language testing. One of the most common definitions sees the concept referred to as the influence of testing on teaching and learning (e.g., Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng & Curtis 2004). Similarly, Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt and Ferman (1996) define washback as "the connections between testing and learning" (p. 298) and Saville (2000) and Hughes (1989) as "the effect of testing on teaching and learning" (p. 4 and p. 1 respectively). Messick (1996), noting that washback can have either harmful or positive effects, describes it as "the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influence language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning" (p. 241).

According to Alderson and Wall (1993) tests can also be powerful determiners, both positively and negatively, of what happens in classrooms. Andrews and Fullilove (1994), cited in Bailey (1999), note that "educationalists often decry the 'negative' washback effects of examinations and regard washback as an impediment to educational reform or 'progressive' innovation in schools" (pp. 59-60).

Since Messick's (1989, 1996) emphasis on consequential validity, the effects a test could have on a wide range of teaching and learning factors have now been more acutely recognized as a central factor of test validity. According to Messick (1996), the use of a particular test should be justified by information about and evidence for its relevance and social consequences at large.

Pierce (1992) states that "the washback effect, sometimes referred to as the systemic validity of a test, refers to the impact of a test on classroom pedagogy, curriculum development, and educational policy" (p. 687). He describes washback in terms of "how assessment instruments affect educational practices and beliefs" (p. 41). More recently, Bachman and Palmer (1996) have discussed washback as not only the impact of tests on teaching and learning

but also as impact on society and educational systems (pp. 29-35). They state that test impact operates at two levels: the micro level (i.e., the effect of the test on individual students and teachers) and the macro level (the impact on society and its educational systems). Bachman and Palmer note, however, that washback is a more complex phenomenon than simply the effect of a test on teaching and learning. Instead, they feel the impact of a test should be evaluated with reference to the contextual variables of society's goals and values, the educational system in which the test is used, and the potential outcomes of its use (p. 35).

Messick (1996) makes the more specific point that washback is “not simply good or bad teaching or learning practice that might occur with or without the test, but rather good or bad practice that is evidentially linked to the introduction and use of the test” (p. 254). He points out that tests which promote positive washback are likely to include tasks which are *criterion sample*—that is, “authentic and direct samples of the communicative behaviors of listening, speaking, reading and writing of the language being learnt” (ibid., p. 241), and, he adds, that the transition from learning exercises to test exercises “should be seamless” (ibid.).

### **High School Certificate Exam in Karachi, Pakistan**

I have chosen to discuss the issues with the assessment of English at high school level for two reasons:

- High school certificate exam in Pakistan is a high stakes exam and English scores are counted toward the students' final scores on the exam.
- I have had the opportunity to teach English at this level for four years, in Karachi, Pakistan, where I have observed the situation closely.

The high school certificate is officially called *Higher-Secondary School Certificate*, commonly known as HSC. Every student seeking this certificate has to appear for exam twice, at the end of eleventh and twelfth years of schooling. In both years, they have to prepare for exams in six subjects: three optional and three compulsory subjects, and English is one of the compulsory ones in both the years. All the subjects carry equal weight in the final scores and therefore, students' performance in compulsory subjects is as important as in the optional ones.

In Karachi, which is the capital of province Sindh and the most highly populated city of Pakistan, this exam is conducted and controlled by an institution called Karachi Board of Intermediate Education, working under the Ministry of Education, Government of Sindh. Every year, the Board appoints a committee of English examiners, for each eleventh and twelfth grade, led by a head examiner. The head examiner *sets* the English paper for that year, supervises the process of the examination and once the exam has been held, assigns the other examiners the answer scripts to mark.

This test is given/taken in two parts: English paper I in the eleventh grade and English paper II in the twelfth grade. For its content, the test draws heavily from the prescribed textbooks<sup>2</sup> which consist of selections from English literature. There are three textbooks for each level: a collection of reading texts and a selection of English poetry in both the years, two one-act plays in the eleventh grade and a novel in the twelfth grade. Although the basic format of the two papers is almost the same, grammar carries more weight in paper I than paper II. A general outline of the test and the distribution of maximum marks (i.e., 100) is presented in Table 1 below.

**Table 1.** General Outline of Test and Distribution of Maximum Marks

Question 1	Explain one of the excerpts from the reading texts with context.	15 marks
Question 2	Explain one of the excerpts from the play or the novel with reference to context.	10 marks
Question 3	Explain one of the excerpts from the poetry with reference to context or write a detailed summary of one of the poems.	10 marks
Question 4	Answer a descriptive question about the reading text.	10 marks
Question 5	Write the sketch of one of the given characters from the play or the novel.	15 marks
Question 6	Do some discrete point grammar exercises.	20 marks
Question 7	Write a letter on one of the given topics or translate the given paragraph from English to Urdu or Sindhi.	8 marks
Question 8	Write an essay of 250 to 300 words on one of the given topics or translate the given paragraph from Urdu or Sindhi to English.	12 marks

### Teaching and Learning of English at High School Level in Karachi

To present my analysis of the teaching and learning of English in my context, I will use a model of washback that is based on a framework suggested by Hughes (1993, cited in Bailey, 1999). According to Hughes, “[i]n order to clarify our thinking about *backwash* [a British alternative term to the American term washback], it is helpful, I believe, to distinguish between participants, process and product in teaching and learning, recognizing that all three may be affected by the nature of a test” (p. 2). In the Hughes framework, *participants* include language learners and teachers, administrators, materials developers, and publishers, “all of whose perceptions and attitudes toward their work may be affected by a test” (ibid.). The term *process* covers “any actions taken by the participants which may contribute to the process of learning” (ibid.). According to Hughes, such processes include materials development, syllabus design, changes in teaching methods or content, learning and/or test-taking strategies, etc. Finally, in Hughes’ framework, *product* refers to “what is learned (facts, skills, etc.) and the quality of learning (fluency, etc.)” (ibid.). In the light of this framework, a critical look at the test described above reveals that it has had significant consequences for its participants, process and product.

To begin with, it is worthwhile to sort out the students from the other participants since the washback processes that influence them will directly affect language learning, while the influences on other participants will affect efforts to promote language learning. According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), the test-takers themselves can be affected by (1) “the experience of taking and, in some cases, of preparing for the test; (2) the feedback they receive about their performance on the test; and (3) the decisions that may be made about them on the basis of the test” (p. 31). The test-takers in this case are affected in the ways pointed out in (1) and (3) above. From the point of view of (3), this test is high-stakes and has had a negative washback on the learners. According to Alderson and Wall’s (1993) washback hypothesis, “[t]ests that have important consequences will have washback” (pp. 120-121) which is the case with Pakistani students. Their scores in the English test are counted toward their final scores from the high school certificate exams which, in turn, are decisive for their admission to professional colleges, especially to medicine, engineering, and business schools.

The experience of preparing for the test is also important for the test takers. As it is evident from the format, the test requires the test takers to write a lot in the limited three hour

time. The required length of the answer depends on the marks the question carries. Also, there has been a precept shared by teachers with their students: ‘the lengthier the better.’ This precept has transformed into a belief and has given rise to the culture of rote learning. Since the test requires students to be able to write long answers to oft repeated questions over the years, students do not feel the need to become proficient in English. All they need to do is to record well-written answers to those questions which they can memorize and reproduce successfully to score high on the test. Since their teachers do not provide notes, this explains the students’ attraction to test preparation centers as they provide ready-made answers to all the expected questions and give them opportunity to have several mock attempts of the test before they actually take it at the end of the year.

Some washback studies have revealed this to be one of the effects of tests in high-stake examination contexts. Students tend to adopt surface approaches to learning as opposed to deep approaches (Crooks, 1988; Entwistle & Entwistle, 1991). As a result, students’ reasoning power is impeded, rote-memorization is encouraged by concentrating on recall of isolated details and students resist attempts to engage in risky cognitive activities which can prove both effective and potentially beneficial for their future improvement (Black & William, 1998; Dietel, Herman, & Knuth, 1991). In the case presented here, this has made acquiring of high scores in English very easy since the students do not have to work hard on gaining proficiency in the language. Another interesting aspect of this test is its predictability. Since the textbooks and the test have not been revised for several years (roughly thirty five years), students can conveniently refer to past papers and predict, to a great extent accurately, the questions that may come in the next year’s test.

Five of Alderson and Wall’s (1993) restatements of the washback hypothesis directly address learner washback, and I think, this test influences the learners in all the five ways they have discussed (i.e., ‘learning,’ ‘what learners learn,’ ‘how learners learn,’ ‘the rate and sequence of learning,’ and ‘the degree and depth of learning’) (pp. 120-121).

The second most important participants of the test are the teachers. The importance of teachers in washback processes is emphasized by Alderson and Wall (1993) in several of their restatements of “the washback hypothesis”:

- A test will influence teaching.
- A test will influence what teachers teach; and
- A test will influence how teachers teach.
- A test will influence the rate and sequence of teaching;
- A test will influence the degree and depth of teaching; and
- A test will influence attitudes to the content, method, etc. of teaching and learning (pp. 120-121).

For most of the teachers in my context, traditional pedagogy (i.e., grammar-translation and emphasis on language usage as opposed to actual language use) serves the purpose. This results in lessons that, for the most part, focus on discrete-point grammar items and the translation of reading passages into the first language. As I reflect on my four-year experience of working with other English teachers in my context, I feel they have stopped worrying about what was happening in their classes. Most of us never questioned the purpose and use of the test nor were we bothered to see our students failing to perform when they were required to. We usually blamed our students’ background knowledge, their social class and lack of effort on their part to explain for their lack of proficiency. We were all so complacent about the way we taught that

some of us who had received training in textbook adaptation and communicative methodology would not even try to use that training in our classrooms because we believed that for the current test system only the traditional methods could work. It seemed that we all had accepted the way things had been.

The research on other participants who try to create, or are influenced by, test washback is less widely developed than the research on language learners and teachers (Bailey, 1999). As I have mentioned in my description of the context, the test writers and administrators in my context are high school teachers themselves who work under the non-specialist bureaucratic machinery of the board of education. Since they have to work within the given frameworks, they follow the same patterns. As for the material writers and publishers, their entire focus has been on writing and publishing comprehensive notes on the prescribed textbooks to help the test-takers and those who prepare them.

As I ponder on the product of the test, I find that this system allows little or no learning of English to actually take place in the classrooms. Except for those who had come from O'level system of secondary education or expensive English medium secondary schools, the graduates of the HSC exam lack even the intermediate level of proficiency in English. Therefore, when they enter the professional life, they feel the need of learning to speak, read and write English. This brings us to another realization as regards the product of the test: this examination system has mushroomed privately run exam preparation centers (popularly called 'coaching centers') and English language learning centers.

## CONCLUSION

Although, the tests are not the only culprit causing the deterioration of educational system, the analysis presented here does point out that tests in the situation above have a negative washback effect. This analysis is far from exhaustive and the situation I have described calls for some systematic in-depth study of the examination system in Pakistan and other underdeveloped contexts faced with similar issues.

Test washback also has broad educational and social implications. According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), it is influencing the individuals, the learner and the teacher at the micro level, by engaging them to pursue superficial goals, that is, high scores rather than learning the language, whereas at the macro level, it is further deteriorating the educational system. Since English is a virtual class-marker in Pakistan (Rehman, 1996, 2000), the education system is only helping to enlarge the gap between the affluent and the poor. In spite of the quality of public education, those who can afford can still have the opportunity to learn English in 'good' English language learning centers and can consequently have access to better jobs and, in turn, better life.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Matriculation is the public school system controlled by the government at provincial level. It mandates twelve years of education, standardized through two certificate exams. The first of these two certificate exams, called secondary school certificate exam (taken in ninth and tenth grades), is considered a ladder to the next academic level (higher secondary school). The second certificate exam, called higher secondary school certificate exam, is important in determining the direction of one's future career. O<sup>2</sup>/A<sup>2</sup> Levels system is the well-known UK based exam system operated through British Council of Pakistan and implemented by private schools.

<sup>2</sup> Intermediate English Book I and II, A Book of English Verse, Two One-Act Plays and The Prisoner of Zenda.

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