

Investigating The Washback Effect Of The English Test At The Secondary And Higher Secondary Level In Meghalaya

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Abstract

Tests wield a powerful influence on language learners and language teachers. Just as tests have the prerogative to select, inspire and reward, they can also be used as tools to exclude, demotivate and punish. Some tests are regarded by stakeholders as being influential. Consequently, these high stakes test will drive many factors like content and methodology of teaching programmes. The impact of a test on teaching and learning is commonly referred to as the “washback effect.” Use of examination scores for various educational and social purposes has made the washback effect a distinct educational phenomenon. Therefore, washback is of fundamental interest to the different stakeholders which include teachers, researchers, test designers, programme coordinators/directors and policy makers. Meghalaya is considered to be the educational hub of the Northeast. Every year, a large number of candidates appear in the high-stakes Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) and Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate (HSSLC) examinations. These tests are purported to have great significance for the learners’ future careers. Hence, teachers and students attempt to explore all possibilities to ensure good examination scores. This paper attempts to study the washback effect of the English test at the secondary and higher secondary level in Meghalaya.

Keywords: high stakes tests, washback effect, examination scores

Introduction

English as a second language is introduced at the entry level in schools and is treated as a compulsory subject in the secondary and higher secondary curriculum in the state. Despite the fact that English is a compulsory subject and is taught early, the quality of English learning and teaching is far from satisfactory. One possible reason for this could be the lack of emphasis on proper training for language teachers. Apart from adequate teacher training, the constructive use of testing may be responsible. Tests wield a powerful influence on language learners and language teachers. Just as tests have the prerogative to select, inspire and reward, they can also be used as tools to exclude, demotivate and punish. Some tests are regarded by stakeholders as being influential. Consequently, these high stakes tests will drive many factors like content and methodology of teaching programmes. The impact of a test on teaching and learning is commonly referred to as the ‘washback effect.’ Use of examination scores for various educational and social purposes has made the washback effect a distinct educational

phenomenon. Therefore, washback is of fundamental interest to the different stakeholders which include teachers, researchers, test designers, programme coordinators/directors and policy makers.

Teaching and Testing

Teaching and testing are inseparable components of language study. According to Lado (1961) “what the student has to learn constitutes the corpus of what we have to test” (p.20). Hughes (2005) admits that “a great deal of language testing is of very poor quality” (p.1). The effect of testing can be either positive or negative. If a test is regarded as a high-stakes test whose consequences have far-reaching effects, then the preparation for it can govern all teaching and learning exercises. If the test content and testing procedures are at odds with the aims and objectives of the course, the test effect will probably be detrimental.

Tests are viewed as the primary tools through which changes in the educational system can be introduced without having to change other educational components such as teacher training or curricula. Testing should support good teaching and where needed, work as a remedial effect to inadequate teaching.

Assessment is important in the process of teaching and learning and one crucial part of language testing is the result of the tests. Test results have far-reaching consequences for the stakeholders concerned since many important decisions are made on the basis of test results. Since tests are objective, they are free from the bias that can impinge upon other forms of assessment (Sumner, 1991). Examinations and tests play a crucial role in the educational system as the information gathered from them are used for selection purposes in education and employment. The positive or negative consequences of the test are associated with washback. Language testing is considered as an instrument through which washback is achieved.

Henning (1987) states that language tests are most commonly used to determine strengths and weaknesses in the abilities of the learner. In a state like Meghalaya where problems such as limited teaching staff and facilities are routine, these tests are important because they help in deciding a learner’s suitability to participate in a particular course of instruction (Harris & McCaan, 2004). These tests also guarantee that only those who are most likely to benefit from such a programme may gain access to it.

What is washback?

In language teaching and testing, the notion of ‘washback’ or ‘backwash’ refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning. These two terms are synonymous. Thus the most basic definition of washback or backwash is that it is the influence a test may have on teachers and learners. The influence could be positive or negative and could occur either at the micro or macro level. At the micro level, the effect of the test is on individual students and teachers. At the macro level, the impact is on society and its educational systems. Washback is in itself a neutral term which ‘can infer positively or negatively on the stakeholders.’ It also works differently in different situations. Bailey (1996) said, “Washback can either be positive or negative to the extent that it either promotes or impedes the accomplishment of educational goals held by learners and/or program personnel”(as quoted by Spratt, 2005). Alderson and Wall

(1993, as cited in Djuric, 2008:17) establish that if teachers use tests to ensure that their students pay more attention to learning and prepare more exhaustively, it is positive washback. But if teachers' fear poor results and the curriculum is narrowed down to prepare students mainly to achieve high scores in tests, then it is negative washback. According to Alderson and Wall (1993) if teachers accepted and worked towards the aims, activities or the marking pattern of the examination and text book without conflict, it could be inferred that positive washback will take place. In such a situation, teachers will not be teaching to the test. They will be teaching the textbook in preparation for any of the items or tasks in the textbook which might appear in the final examination.

Alderson and Wall's (1992) article, "Does Washback Exist?" is considered a seminal work in washback studies. They put forward a series of washback hypotheses which may possibly play a role in the washback effect. These hypotheses are listed below:

1. A test will influence teaching
2. A test will influence learning
3. A test will influence how teachers teach
4. A test will influence what teachers teach
5. A test will influence what learners learn
6. A test will influence how learners learn
7. A test will influence the rate and sequence of learning
8. A test will influence the rate and sequence of teaching
9. A test will influence the degree and depth of learning
10. A test will influence the degree and depth of teaching
11. A test will influence attitudes to the content, method etc of learning/teaching
12. Tests that have important consequences will have washback
13. Tests that do not have important consequences will have no washback
14. Tests will have washback on all learners and teachers
15. Tests will have washback effects for some learners and teachers, but not for others

From the above, we can assume that teaching is one variable. Learning is a separate though related variable. Other variables comprise test content, teaching content and learning content. In the Sri Lankan study, Wall and Alderson (1993) highlight certain statements on the impact of the new Sri Lankan texts and tests and its repercussions on the teachers. Wall and Alderson (1993) deduced that a considerable number of teachers do not comprehend the philosophy of the textbook. This could be due to lack of adequate training and insufficient guidance provided by the *Teacher's Guides*. The teachers were not able to implement the recommended methodology as they either lacked the skills or felt that circumstances in their teaching situation constrained them from teaching the way they assumed they should. Many teachers are not familiar with the nature of the examination and are not aware of what is actually being tested. All teachers felt that if they knew what the examinations demands, they would willingly comply with what is expected and a considerable number of them were unable or felt unable to gird their students for everything that might be included in the examination.

The Meghalaya Context

In Meghalaya, the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) and the Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate (HSSLC) examinations conducted by the Meghalaya Board of School Education (MBOSE) are considered high stakes tests as they have far-reaching consequences for the learners' futures. Accordingly, these tests are seen to have a big impact on the society and educational institutions. This is evident from the effort and resources spent by the concerned stakeholders in helping learners perform well in these tests. They adapt their learning styles and activities to the requirements of the test. Similarly, teachers tailor their efforts to deliver the prescribed syllabus. They take recourse to notes and past question papers from several years to provide practice for their students. Thus, teachers "teach to the test" and as Luke Prodromou (1993, p.14) argues, "When the market calls on teachers and institutions to produce quantifiable results, it usually means good *examination* results. Sound teaching practices are often sacrificed in an anxious attempt to 'cover' the examination syllabus, and to keep ahead of the competition."

It is therefore necessary to investigate the extent to which the English language tests affect the teaching and learning of English at the Secondary and Higher secondary level and to what extent washback can improve English language test preparation process for the Board examination. In order to determine the feasibility of carrying out this research, a pilot study was conducted to investigate the effect of the English test at the Secondary and Higher Secondary level of schools following the MBOSE syllabus.

A Pilot Study on the Washback Effect of the English Test on the Secondary and Higher Secondary level in Meghalaya

The results of the Secondary School Leaving Certificate (SSLC) and Higher Secondary School Leaving Certificate (HSSLC) examinations from 2010 to 2014 show a rising trend in the percentage of pass of students. In spite of acquiring good marks and qualifying for entry into higher education, many students in Meghalaya exhibit poor language performance. This indicates that the desired educational goals are not fully achieved and can pose a real problem.

The ESL (English as a Second Language) tests in the SSLC and HSSLC examinations are conventional paper and pen tests. Class time is spent in exercises and drilling and dealing with grammar and pronunciation. In the teaching of the four basic skills of Listening, Speaking, Reading and Writing, listening and speaking were relegated to the background. The reason is because these components are not included in the test. In the present situation, good listening and speaking skills have become very important and language teaching should cater to the practical needs of learners and make them competent to interact with people around them.

The teacher-student ratio in Meghalaya is abysmally low. . The teacher has no time to give individual attention to the weak learner or the prodigious student. This hinders learners' potential growth. An appraisal of the pattern of question setting reveal that it would be easy to predict what questions would be asked on what books. Thus the students infer that they simply have to memorize. Consequently, teachers also teach only those aspects which are important for examinations. It may be assumed that teaching methodology is shaped on the type of evaluation although in an ideal situation, the converse should hold good. The English examination encourages students to learn by rote because questions are based on summarizing either a narration or a poem. Listening and speaking skills are totally ignored. Motivating the students

becomes an arduous task because the students are only interested in studying only what will come in the examinations. They attach great importance to past question papers and rely heavily on the help books that flood the market. Students regard these as essential to pass the examination.

The aim of teaching English is to enable learners to understand, speak, read and write in English. The ET (English Test) administered by MBOSE ignores communicative language competence and concentrates on learners' reading and writing abilities. Thus it limits teaching methods. So it becomes the responsibility of the teachers to make their classes interesting and motivate their students so that fruitful learning of the language takes place. However, this becomes an onerous task as teachers are forced to work under extenuating circumstances. Teaching to the test becomes the order of the day and negative washback takes place. Ultimately, the curriculum is narrowed down to what is included in the test. Consequently, the aims of teaching a second language are not realized.

This study aims to investigate the washback effects in English testing in the SSLC and HSSLC examinations of the MBOSE. The areas where washback can appear (Spratt 2005) include curriculum, teaching methods, attitudes and feelings and learning. The findings of this study is expected to contribute valuable information to improve the testing system so that it can facilitate the goals and objectives of the language teaching programme and thus promote second language learning.

Definition of the sample population

The sample population of the pilot study includes one hundred and ten students studying in Class IX and Class XI and twenty teachers from both urban and rural backgrounds. Students studying in Classes IX and XI were selected because they will be preparing for the high stakes SSLC and HSSLC examinations respectively to be held in the following year. It is therefore surmised that their responses to the queries were more likely to be valid and reliable because they will be directly affected by the tests.

Tools used for the Study

The tools for the study include:

- Questionnaire for teachers
- Questionnaire for students

A common questionnaire is administered to both Class IX and Class XI students.

Methodology

The pilot study involves both the qualitative and quantitative approaches and the data is collected through a social survey research technique

Findings

The findings of the data collected for the Pilot Study is presented below:

Findings of Students' Questionnaire

- Teaching input is based on a working Syllabus
- Most learners emphasize on the study of only items included in the syllabus
- Certain sections of the syllabus that are unlikely to be tested are not taught
- Learners from both classes do not rely fully on test-related materials
- Remedial coaching on the basis of test scores is seldom made available to weak students or those who are above average
- Rural students claim to benefit from mock tests
- Learners regard tests to be of pivotal importance and consider test scores indicators of their proficiency in English.
- Learners are not aware of the connotations of the four skills
- The comparative test scores of Class IX students in the Board and school examination are dissimilar.
- For Class XI students, the two test scores are complementary
- Learners believe that reading storybooks, newspapers and magazines in English will help them develop their language proficiency
- More rural learners feel that their Board examination score is nearly similar to their school examination score
- A poor or average score will motivate students to work hard so that future performance will improve
- Scoring well in English tests will embolden them to face more tests so that they can examine their aptitude and competence
- Learners practice the activities and tasks that are not directly tested at home, possibly to save time
- Learners from both classes and backgrounds have cultivated the habit of reading the text more than once for better understanding
- At the secondary level, more students prefer to discuss the text with the teacher
- The red marks and teachers' comments on the answer scripts appear to be the yardstick by which learners at the secondary level gauge their mistakes

Findings of Teachers' Questionnaire

- A sizable section of teachers appear to have had no exposure to teacher training or training in test preparation
- Teachers feel that test items should be related to the syllabus
- Teachers express a positive attitude towards Comprehensive and Continuous Evaluation
- Teachers believe that students are dependent on test-related materials like test papers of previous years and model/sample questions.
- Teachers favour completion of the whole text and also use supplementary materials to enhance students' comprehension
- Teachers modify their lesson plans after a review of students' performance

- Reflection on their teaching methods also compels them to modify their lesson plan to suit the learners' needs
- Doubt-clearing sessions are encouraged in the class
- Teachers focus more on mistakes
- Remedial coaching to weak students is seldom given

Conclusion

The findings of the pilot study indicate the existence of washback in the ESL testing at the Secondary and Higher Secondary level in Meghalaya. Teaching and learning is test-driven. The SSLC and HSSLC are high-stakes tests and are seen to have a big impact on the society and educational institutions. Learners and teachers explore all possibilities to ensure performance resulting in good scores and washback has an important role to play as it can be understood as a powerful tool to introduce changes not only in teaching and learning but also in educational policy if it is supported by evidence and research. Therefore a major study on the topic can be proposed to examine the extent to which changes in the ESL Test in the secondary and higher secondary level in schools following the MBOSE syllabus may reform and improve instruction to facilitate students' communicative competence in English.

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