

WASHBACK: THE INFLUENCE OF FINAL SEMESTER ASSIGNMENT ON ENGLISH TEACHING AT SMK NEGERI 1 SITUBONDO

Yogi Surya Syahputra

Sebelas Maret University, Surakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding e-mail: yogisuryasyahputra@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Washback effect means the influence of a test on the classroom, the teacher and learners. It is understood that the purpose of a test or an examination is not simply to distinguish students' achievement or ability. From students' point of view, a test is also essential to see about their grades. For teacher, the test reflects the effectiveness of the teaching. It reflects how well or appropriate the teacher's teaching, teaching media, and etc. This paper explores the relationship concerning the envisioned influence of the final English exam at SMK Negeri 1 Situbondo, teachers' perceptions towards the exam and their classroom practices. The paper also identifies the existence of factors that seem influencing the teaching and learning. It is concluded by making recommendations for future research and for teachers and teacher educators on avoiding negative effects from high-stakes exams.

Key Terms: *Washback, teacher's perceptions, test impact.*

INTRODUCTION

Test or examination is not simply just to recognize the students' achievement or ability. For students, a test is essential to be acquainted with their grades. For teacher, the test reflects the effectiveness of the teaching. Simply said, the test has an impact on both teaching and learning. It is believed that our education goal is not intensely educate them. Relatively, it is mostly to pass the "test" to get higher grade. Various tests like standardized test, multiple choice, etc. are examples of the test mostly used. Such a phenomenon creates new situation in which a test can impact the overall aspects in education. It is called washback effect.

There are numerous different definitions of the term washback. In general, the term washback can be described as the impact of the test. Oxford dictionary defines washback as "unpleasant after-effect of an event". Meanwhile, washback refers to the influence or impact of the test on teaching and learning (Alderson & Wall

in Cheng, 2004). Washback is a distinct and emerging area within a language testing, to which we needed to turn our attention. It means washback can impact both students and teacher in the teaching and learning process. It also implies that there is always a connection between testing and learning.

Washback can have either harmful or positive effects. It is also described as the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning (Messick, 1996). Washback tells us not only about the influence on the classroom, the teacher and learners, but also the larger findings including teaching and learning, educational system and the various stakeholders in education process (Cheng, 2004).

In addition, Hughes introduces his models of washback, trichotomy, occurring in actual teaching and learning environment. The Hughes' trichotomy explains that a nature of a

test may have washback on 3 aspects, those are:

1. participants—students, classroom teachers, administrators, materials developers and publishers, whose perceptions and attitudes toward their work may be affected by a test
2. processes—any actions taken by the participants which may contribute to the process of learning
3. products—what is learned (facts, skills, etc.) and the quality of the learning. The focus of Hughes' mechanism of washback is towards the participants, processes and the products. Although the interpretations of washback are different from many experts, they all refer to the same thing, washback is the influence of testing on teaching and learning.

Washback effect of the test can be positive or negative. Generally saying, positive washback is the situation when the changes of material, teaching style, curriculum, etc. are advantageous. However, it is called negative washback if the aspects of teaching or learning (curriculum, technique, material etc.) cause changes which are considered as not good, ineffective or even harmful for students achievement. The two terms will be explained below.

a. Positive washback

In general, the term positive washback refers to when the changes in teaching and learning which are beneficial. The changes here mean the promotion of language learning in authentic context, less stressful environment, attention of students' needs and learning for the purpose of learning not the test (Lombourdi,

2014: 21). For optimal positive washback, there should be difference between activities involved in learning the language and activities involved in preparing for the test (Messick in Cheng, 2004). It means that positive washback will be achieved if both the activities in learning and in preparing test have no large difference. As already known, the majority students and teacher usually prepare more due to an upcoming test, but in usual teaching and learning process there is no big effort.

In positive washback, teachers and learners have a positive attitude toward the examination or test. They work willingly and collaboratively toward the objectives. (Cheng, 2004). The positive washback can be achieved by:

1. Using various activities as unpredictable as possible. The reason is because students tend to just focus on the predicted items.
2. Testing skills which wants to be promoted
3. Using direct and authentic testing.
4. Using criterion-referenced tests because it establishes a minimum-pass mark
5. Making sure that the test is fully understood by teachers and learners
6. Considering all the things related to teaching and learning (Hughes in Lambourdi, 2014)

It can be concluded that positive washback is not always caused by a good test. All the things must be considered. A good test can result in negative washback, depending on how the test is taught and what is the methodology used by teacher.

b. Negative washback

As it was said before, the test does not always have positive washback. It can create negative washback also.

Generally speaking, negative washback refers to the situation when the effect and preparation of the test is considered to be disadvantageous, resulting on ineffective techniques and narrowing the curriculum. The test is considered to have negative washback if it fails to reflect the learning principles and objectives to which the test supposedly relates (Pearson in Cheng, 2004). It means that the learning goals and principle must be met so as not to have negative washback. In reality whether or not they are met, students and teacher still go on with the test. Many actions which can develop into either positive or negative washback, such as:

1. Practicing items similar in format to those of the test.
2. Studying vocabulary and grammar rules
3. Applying test-taking strategies
4. Enrolling in test preparation courses
5. Enrolling in, or requesting, additional – unscheduled – test preparation classes or tutorials
6. Skipping language classes to study for the test
7. Continuous review of the same material
8. Stressful environment and tension
9. Pressure to cover the exam material
10. Repetition and drilling of the same material (Bailey in Loumbourdi, 2014)

Teacher-designed materials, past examination papers, or publications designed to help students to prepare for the exam, might result in ‘narrowing of the curriculum’ to match the exam (Wall and Alderson, 1993). Those factors may cause washback effect. Numerous factors of negative washback such as the limited time allocation, not contextualized test items, the

unwillingness of teachers to take risks with material not directly linked to the exams, and anxiety of teacher and students (Prodromou in Loumbourdi, 2014). However, not all poor tests may create negative washback. Bad test may result in positive washback if the methodology in teaching and students’ individual needs are appropriate and vice versa. In conclusion, the impact of a test has many changes depending on how it is handled and how the quality of the test (Loumbourdi, 2014).

From the explanation above, washback effect is known as the influence of testing on teaching. The impact or the washback can be positive or negative. The nature of washback itself usually exists in every test. However the research into washback test on learners and teachers is limited. This paper wanted to explore whether a test has an impact on Vocational High School students. The research was conducted based on the teaching-learning process in SMK Negeri 1 Situbondo. To distinguish it, this research was guided by two research questions: 1) What are the washback effects of an English final assignment test in SMK Negeri 1 Situbondo?, and 2) How does washback effect in a final English test affect the learners and teachers in teaching and learning process?

METHODOLOGY

The mini-research had been conducted to find out the answer of the research questions above. The research design was qualitative research. Qualitative research is a research which has a purpose to gain in-depth information about a unique case in such a particular subject of the research. The data collection technique used by the researchers was using interview to the English teacher, Mr. SH. Mr. SH was

teaching in SMK Negeri 1 Situbondo for two years.

The data was analyzed by applying Miles and Huberman's data analysis technique. Data reduction, data display, and data conclusion technique was applied to find out the washback on an English final test examination to the teacher, students, and teaching and learning process.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

After conducting thorough research about the washback of English Test in SMK Negeri 1 Situbondo, the researcher found the impact of the final semester assignment to the teaching and learning practice. From the document analysis of the students' result in final test assignment, it can be concluded that most students were not be able to pass the standard passing grade that was maintained by the English teacher. It means that students have to evaluate their learning and motivation in learning English. From the interview with the English teacher in SMK Negeri 1 Situbondo, there were several aspects that influenced that result of the students' achievement that the researchers would explain in the description below. From the theoretical analysis, the researchers related the result of the interview and document analysis with the kinds of washback based on the negative and positive washback then drew the conclusion whether the washback of the teaching and learning process went to positive or negative one.

CLASSROOM CONDITION

An interview was taken place in SMK Negeri 1 Situbondo. The teacher described the environment of the class by giving an explanation that the classroom activity during the semester was too dependent on the teacher. The

teacher was seen as the one and only person as 'God or Goddess', a 'moving dictionary', a 'walking grammar', 'the expert', 'an authority' or 'a know-all person'. So, the activity in the class was full of boredom with little creativity of the students. Most of the meetings, the learning process was teacher-centered. So, the expectation of the teacher for her classroom was very low because the improvement was so little since the students were not able to be independent learners. Teachers felt that their students expected them not to teach the language but to prepare them successfully for the exam.

Another negative phenomenon in the classroom before the test was the students' dependency that gave her stressful feeling since the expectation from the curriculum and parents towards the success of their children was too high. That's why she had to find a lot of techniques to deliver the materials to assist her students to be able to pass the standard criteria. Furthermore, with the high expectation of the parents and curriculum, the teacher felt so anxious about the achievement of the students in her classroom.

The students' activity in the classroom was not as active as it should be. There were several students who participated actively in the classroom. The upper students actively answered teacher's question but the lower students kept silent and listened to their friends. He observed this situation and found that the lower students had limited vocabulary, lack of grammatical comprehension, and unwillingness to be brave and confident.

As the objectives of the English teaching and learning require students to pass the examination, the situation made her planning to improve students' ability changed. The methodology,

technique, and strategy made by the teacher had to be adjusted with the oncoming test questions. It made her unable to give her students sufficient ability in communication with the target language, English. Because of the reason, students did not achieve better ability because the time given to them was limited to the test preparation. The teacher told the researcher that the policy of the ELT in Vocational High School also contributed to the limitation of the training to improve students' ability. Because of the policy, the time given was shortened from 4 lesson hours/week to 3 lesson hours/week. As we understand that 40 minutes includes opening and closing. So, the teacher was so confused to manage the time whether to focus on the achievement of the students in the oncoming test, or to focus on the improvement of the students' ability in communication.

SITUATIONS OF THE STUDENTS

The teacher in the interview with the researcher explained that there were several impacts of the final test assignment result on the learning activity of the students. Before the test was conducted, the students seemed so interested in learning the language even though they did not have broad vocabulary and they lacked confidence. Despite of their lack of vocabulary, they asked the teacher about the meaning of several words and they loved to ask a lot. Students expressed strong desire for predictability according to their teachers. They wanted her to provide them with 'repeated items' and they would get upset if she were not able to prepare them adequately for what was to come in the exam.

When the test time was approaching, students became so scared about the difficulties of the test. They panicked and felt scared whether they

could be able to answer the test correctly. However, the difficulty level of the test was similar to the previous test except there were several changes in the item like: the subject and the distractors. The questions were made almost the same with the previous test. Even though the test was made almost similar to the previous test, the result of the test was devastating. Parents' expectation also created a huge impact to the failure and success of the students' achievement. It could be seen from the students that they were expected to graduate or to pass the exam with, at least, satisfactory. The nature of the exam, the exam-oriented methodology, and the uncreative material used in the classroom was believed to be one of the reasons that made students bored and demotivated.

WASHBACK ON TEACHER AND STUDENTS

From the definition of washback stated by Alderson and Wall in Tsagari (2011) who describe washback as the impact of a test in learning policy, methodology, strategy, and teacher-student's attitude, there were several washbacks on the teacher and the students about the result of the test in their teaching and learning activity. The first washback on the teacher was the improvement of the teaching plan (lesson plan). The lesson plan was designed by integrating the communicative competence objectives to improve the students' ability in oral and written communication. It would help students not only in their examination but also in their improvement to gain a better comprehension and ability in English.

The second washback after the test was the improvement on the motivation of the students. The students were motivated to be better in learning

English. The motivation itself would help them to gain a spirit to pass the examination and prepare the exam very carefully. From the motivation and attitude toward learning English, teacher could hope the result and their ability increased. Teacher has to set the classroom activity to be very cheerful and build curiosity among students to improve their critical thinking.

The third washback was the improvement on the teaching target or objectives. Teacher's target would exceptionally increase since the lesson plan and students' motivation became better.

CONCLUSION

Washback is one way to improve teaching and learning process in education, especially language education (Wall & Anderson, 1993; Cheng, 1997; Safa & Goodarzi, 2014). The studies of washback have been widely used to investigate the students' motivation, learning styles, learning strategies and educational outcomes and achievements (Safa & Goodarzi, 2014). Usually, the research about washback is related to the teacher's perception towards the implementation of certain

technique, methodology, and strategy which are used in the teaching and learning process.

From the result of the research, it could be concluded that there were three washbacks on the implementation of an English final term assignment that were, 1) the improvement of the teaching plan (lesson plan). The lesson plan was designed by integrating the communicative competence objectives to improve the students' ability in oral and written communication; 2) the improvement on the motivation of the students. The students were motivated to learn English; 3) the improvement on the teaching target or objectives.

From the result of the language assessment washback, a language teacher can provide better lesson planning, methodology, and strategy to be given to the students in his or her classroom. Teachers may select the better activities to improve students' communicative competence in English and create a positive atmosphere during learning process. With a positive atmosphere, students may explore their capability and ability to do a learning practice and hopefully pass the assignment.

REFERENCES

Alderson, J.C. and Wall, D. (1993) Does washback exist? In *Applied Linguistics*

- Bailey, K. M. (1996). Working for Washback: A Review of the Washback Concept in Language Testing. *Language Testing*
- Cheng, L. (2004). *Washback in Language Testing Research Contexts and Methods*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum
- Loumbourdi, L. (2014). *The Power and Impact of Standardized Tests Investigating the Washback of Language Exams in Greece*. Frankfurt am Main: Lang-Ed.
- Messick, S. (1996). Validity and Washback in Language Testing. *Language Testing*.
- Safa, Mohammad Ahmadi, & Goodarzi, Sa'ideh. (2014). The Washback Effects of Task-based Assessment on the Iranian EFL Learners' Grammar Development. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 90-99.
- Tsagari, Dina. (2011). *Washback of A High-stakes English Exam on Teachers' Perceptions and Practices*. Paper presented at the ISTAL 19th.