

# Washback Effect: Conceptual Overview and Review of Related Literature

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**Abstract-** Testing is a critical aspect of a student's academic journey. It has an impact on grade placement, curriculum, and, in some situations, funding. Tests also guard the entrance to the next level of education and the effect of success or failure in these are significant. Washback is a term commonly used in applied linguistics and simply put, can be defined as the influence of testing on teaching and learning. The concept has become a well-versed academic phenomenon in all the institutions. The main aim of this paper is to provide an overview of the concept of washback and also to summarize the reviewed research work done by various researchers on the topic of washback effect. Through the review of related literature, it has been found that washback effect varies from having both negative and positive impacts depending on factors such as teachers, learners, curriculum developers and other such stakeholders.

**Keywords:** Washback effect, testing, academic phenomenon.

## INTRODUCTION

It is a commonly accepted fact that testing, especially those that are considered high- stakes, directly influence educational processes in various ways. These high- stakes tests are associated with having direct and indirect consequences for test-takers and other stakeholders and are acknowledged to be the gateway to attain future goals. Testing or examination is a powerful tool that can be regarded as a double-edged sword. Just as it has the capability to motivate and reward, it can also be used as a means to de-motivate and punish.

The reason for some tests being labelled 'high-stakes' is because the results of such tests are seen "rightly or wrongly- by students, teachers, administrators, parents, or the general public, as being used to make important decisions that immediately and directly affect them" (Madaus, 1988, p. 87). Both teachers and students have a natural tendency to customise their classroom activities to the needs of the test, especially once the test is critical to the students' future performance and pass rates are used to gauge teacher success. Due to the high-stake nature of examinations, learning in recent times tends to swerve towards passing or excelling in those, and there can be doubts about whether or not the goals of education are becoming a lesser priority. The study of impacts of those high stakes test in teaching and learning is what has been termed 'washback effect' studies.

## OBJECTIVES

1. To provide a conceptual overview of washback effect.
2. To provide an overview of the related literature pertaining to washback effect studies.

## CONCEPTUAL OVERVIEW OF WASHBACK EFFECT

Washback, the term which is often used interchangeably with 'backwash' is a term commonly used in applied linguistics, is the influence of testing on teaching and learning. (Alderson & Wall, 1993). "Washback" (alternatively "backwash") is a term used in education to describe the influence, whether beneficial or damaging, of an assessment on the teaching and learning that precedes and prepares for that assessment. It refers to the extent to which the test influences language teachers and learners to do things 'they would not necessarily otherwise do because of the test' (Alderson & Wall 1993, p.117).

Washback has become a well versed common academic phenomenon in all the institutions (Shawcross, 2007). Over the past 30 years, washback, often conceived as one instance of "impact" or the range of effects that assessment may have on society more generally, has become established as a popular topic for applied linguistics research.

Commencing with the phenomenal work of Alderson and Wall (1993), a considerable body of empirical studies of washback has been carried out throughout the world. However, only handful studies of such nature have been conducted in India.

## OVERVIEW OF REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Authors	Name of Study	Major Findings
Alderson and Wall (1993)	Does washback exist?	Washback on teaching content exist, while washback on teaching methods was not found.
Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996)	"TOEFL Preparation Courses: A Study of Washback"	TOEFL has an impact on both what and how teachers teach, but that the effect varies in degree and type depending on the teacher.
Mohammadi (2007)	High-Stakes Testing Washback: A Survey on the Effect of Iranian MA Entrance Examination on Teaching	The majority of the participants were favourably affected by the examination. Also, their methods and attitudes were gradually adjusted to meet the examination's requirements.

Ghorbani et.al. (2008)	The Washback Impact of the Iranian University Entrance Examination on Pre-University English Teachers.	PETs perceive the UEE exam to have a negative impact on the learners.
Wang (2010)	A Study of the Role of the 'Teacher Factor' in Washback.	The washback effect is facilitated by the CET (College English Test) and negatively impacted pedagogical practices.
Cheng, et al. (2011)	Impact and Consequences of School-Based Assessment (SBA): Students' and Parents' Views of SBA in Hong Kong	Parents' perceptions of SBA predicted their support for their children's SBA learning in a significant and favourable way.
Safa and Goodarzi (2014)	The Washback Effects of Task-Based Assessment on the Iranian EFL Learners' Grammar Development	TBLA had a positive washback effect on EFL learners' grammatical progress
Allen (2016)	Investigating washback to the learner from the IELTS test in the Japanese tertiary context.	Positive washback effect was found.
Umashankar (2017)	Washback Effects of Speaking Assessment of Teaching English in Sri Lankan Schools.	Washback does occur in this situation, but it does so in a complicated way that is influenced by a number of other factors other than the evaluation itself.
Umam and Zabidi (2021)	The Washback Effect in Online Language Assessment on Student's Learning Interest	The findings show a positive washback effect because it is considered capable of improving students' English skills and abilities
Dawadi (2021)	Factors Affecting Washback of a High-Stakes English as a Foreign Language Test	A variety of factors influence the nature of high-stakes examinations, including economic circumstances, social prestige associated with test success, parents' educational backgrounds along with importance given to the English as a subject and a language.
Sharon Grace (2020)	A study surveying the understanding of the washback effect of tests and its implications for teaching by ESL teachers in engineering colleges in Tamilnadu.	There is a mixture of both the practice of positive and negative washback effect observed in the teachers' practice related to teaching and testing. Most of the teachers tend to practice negative washback unknowingly.
Joseph John Kennedy J.(2016)	Working towards positive washback changing teaching and learning by changing testing	Existing university examinations causes negative washback. New English proficiency tests creates positive washback.
Vennakkadan (2016)	Examination Washback on Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language Testing Versus the Four Skills At UG Level	Teachers' perception is that content, rather than method is negatively impacted by testing. Learners perceive that their learning is positively impacted by the test.
Hedayatullah (2019)	Investigating the Washback Effect of English Language Test at the Undergraduate Level in JMI A Linguistic Study	Mostly positive washback is found in students' learning practices.
Khongwir (2018)	The Washback Effects on the ESL Teaching Learning at the Secondary and Higher Secondary Levels in Meghalaya: A Comparative Study	Mixed washbacks are found on stakeholders.

From the review and analysis of related literature, it can be seen that most washback studies concentrate on the views on teacher's teaching and much lesser studies are conducted on the learner's learning process. Fewer still are studies regarding parents' awareness and perception of the washback effect.

### Studies conducted on teachers' teaching

The pioneer work of Anderson and Wall (1993) which was conducted in Sri Lanka finds that washback effect does exist on the teaching content, but not on the teaching method. Learner's perception is not taken into account in this study. The teachers' teaching is also studied by Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996), Mohammadi (2007), Ghorbani et.al. (2008), Wang (2010), Joseph John Kennedy J.(2016), Vennakkadan (2016), Umashankar (2017), and Sharon Grace (2020).

These studies find that teachers' teaching content and method, particularly in selection of contents and modification of teaching method are often impacted negatively by the concerned tests or examinations. Teachers tend to minimize the syllabus re-structure their teaching methods in accordance with the question format usually given in the subsequent tests. However, several factors contribute to these changes. For instance, Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) claim that teacher training and experience, availability of classroom resources resulted in variations in the degree and direction of washback. Also, practicing negative washback is often unintentional. Due to pressure to push the learners to perform well in their upcoming examinations, teachers often unknowingly tend to practice negative washback, which is evident from the study conducted by Sharon Grace (2020).

### Studies conducted on learners' learning

The washback effect on learners' learning (selection of content and method) is studied by Cheng, et al. (2011), Safa and Goodarzi (2014), Allen (2016), Vennakkadan (2016), Khongwir(2018), Hedayatullah (2019), Umam and Zabidi (2021), and Dawadi (2021). In the majority of these studies, the findings show that learners perceive that their learning is actually favourably impacted by the tests, which they claim to make them study harder and more comprehensively. However, as evident from the study conducted by Khongwir(2018), it can be seen that learners are more concerned with getting high scores in the tests rather than learning the language to be able to use in context. This, in contradiction shows that this in fact is a negative washback.

### Factors that contribute to washback effect

From the review of washback studies, there are variety of factors, beside the teacher/learner/tests itself that contribute to heightening the washback effect. Dawadi (2021) finds that economic circumstances, social prestige associated with test success, parents' educational backgrounds along with importance given to the English as a subject and a language are large and looming factors.

### Suggestions made by the studies

Safa and Goodarzi (2014), Joseph John Kennedy J.(2016) and Vennakkadan (2016), suggested reforms in assessment in order to minimize the negative washback effect. In addition to this, Wang (2010) suggested curriculum reforms in order to truly bring change to teachers' pedagogical practices.

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