

Original Paper

Qualitative Study of Iranian English University Entrance Examination in the light of Positive Washback Strategies

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Abstract

Washback refers to the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do (Alderson and Wall, 1993, as cited in Fulcher and Davidson, 2007:224). According to the effect of examinations on what we do in the classroom, we may refer to 'positive' and 'negative' washback (Brown, 2000 & 2002). The aim of the present study is to determine whether the recent versions of the Iranian English university entrance examination have observed the criteria set for the creation and promotion of positive washback. In doing so, the last three versions of the Iranian English university entrance examination for the Humanities (IEUEEH), as the representative of such tests, were purposefully sampled and analyzed qualitatively on Brown (2000) positive washback strategies. Also, to avoid subjective analysis, where needed, through convenient sampling forty one English teachers in different parts of Mashhad (the Iranian second largest city) were interviewed on such positive washback strategies regarding (IEUEEH). Findings showed that most of the positive washback strategies had not been observed by the last three versions of the IEUEEH. Only two or three of such strategies had been fairly observed. As a result, it seems that in most cases the last three versions of the IEUEEH have negatively influenced the Iranian English language teaching and learning program.

Keywords

language testing, language teaching, washback, university entrance examination

1. Introduction

It is almost a long time that the idea of washback has been around and perhaps most language testing educators have been aware of its impact on educational programs, teachers and learners, but just recently, language testing scholars somehow have been urged to investigate it more seriously (Razavipour, K., Riazi, A., & Rashidi, N. 2011).

The idea of washback encompasses both teaching and testing situations. Washback is generally known

as the effect of testing on teaching. Alderson and Wall (1993, as cited in Fulcher and Davidson, 2007: 224) described it as “a complex phenomenon” and in their washback hypotheses they assumed that teachers and learners “do things they would not necessarily otherwise do because of the test”.

Language testing occurs in a variety of contexts: the two important are: 1) the school context, in which tests and other assessment procedures are used as means of improving teaching and learning in the school; and 2) the external context, in which tests are used to make important decisions about the future of individuals, as granting certificate, accepting candidates to programs, and placing students in appropriate programs (Shohamy, 1992, Cheng, 2005).

The recent phenomenon in language testing is the use of external tests to influence and drive foreign language teaching and learning in the school context. Language tests that have traditionally been used to make decisions and judgments about the future of individuals are now being used to influence educational context of learning. Shohamy (1992 & 2001) states that this phenomenon is the result of the strong authority of external testing and the great impact it has on the lives of test-takers. As a result, external tests such as ‘public examinations’ have become most powerful devices, capable of changing and prescribing the behaviors of those who are affected by their consequences, that is, teachers, learners, administrators, teacher trainers, and curriculum designers (Shohamy, 1992 & 2001; Wall, 1996, 2000 & 2005).

Ministries of Education and decision makers, being aware of the strong impact of external tests, have often made use of such tests to impose new curricula, new text-books and new teaching methods. Therefore, external tests are currently used to force students to study, teachers to teach, and curriculum designers to modify curriculum in the direction of external tests objectives. The use of external tests as means of creating impact on educational process is often referred to as the ‘washback effect’ or ‘backwash’ - a term which is popular in British Applied linguistics (Shohamy, 1992; Alderson and Wall, 1993; Chapman, 2000).

2. Statement of the Problem

It is almost three decades that Iranian Ministry of Science and Technology has been using the Iranian English University Entrance Examination (IEUEE) to accept candidates into different programs. The students who complete the preparatory programs finally take such an exam to promote to higher levels of education and as a result increase their lives chances. Here is the key role that the IEUEE plays. Most of the Iranian students who take this test perform poorly and as a result, the students who score higher will be accepted into top majors in comparison to the other ones. Even the students who score higher on this test cannot use language communicatively and they just know some discrete knowledge of grammar and vocabulary and some mechanics how to take this test. Therefore, it seems that this powerful test hasn’t been successful to influence the Iranian ELT program to match itself to language testing standards, that is, creating and promoting positive washback.

3. Research Questions

- (1) Has the Iranian English university entrance examination observed the strategies set for the creation and promotion of positive washback?
- (2) Has the Iranian English university entrance examination influenced the Iranian ELT program in a negative or a positive way?

4. Review of Literature

In educational literature, there seems to be general consensus that tests have washback effects. The term washback refers to the positive or negative influence that tests have on teaching and learning (Hughes, 1989; Alderson and Wall, 1993 in Fulcher & Davidson, 2007). Although this educational phenomenon has historically been commonly associated with rather more harmful than beneficial effects (Spolsky, 1996; Chapman et al., 2000), in the past decades, tests, particularly high-stakes public tests, have been used to promote curricular and pedagogical change and obtain beneficial washback (Wall and Alderson, 1993; Cheng, 1997, 2005; Wall, 2000; Saif, 2006). Underlying this latter approach there is the assumption that high-stakes tests, namely, tests which are supposed to have important consequences for test-takers and other people involved (Madaus, 1988), can exert a desirable influence on teaching and learning and improve educational practices through reform of examinations (Chapman et al., 2000; McNamara, 2000; Shohamy, 2001). Thus, Weir (1990) claims that tests can be very powerful tools for curriculum innovation in language teaching. In the same way, Spolsky (1996) points out that tests are powerful tools that can be used to control and modify instruction. Similarly, supporters of measurement-driven instruction (MDI), promote the use of tests as deliberate washback generating devices and claim that tests are the most cost-effective way of improving education and support good practice (Popham, 1987).

The emphasis on promoting positive washback has also been a major concern of communicative language tests. High-stakes tests have, therefore, been adopted to connect tests more closely to communicative teaching. As Green (2007) refers: “Tests may be modified under pressure from teachers to reflect more closely, and so support, desired practices in teaching and learning”. Following this idea, many researchers (Adair-Hauck et al., 2006; Choi, 2008; Norris, 2009) believe that the main objective of testing should be to feed into students’ learning and improve performance, not merely evaluate it: “Tests should be used as a nexus to connect classroom based instruction practices and work in tandem” (Adair-Hauck et al., 2006).

Despite everything that has been said, the use of high-stakes tests to deliberately make beneficial washback and improve educational practices has not produced conclusive results. Hughes (1988) reported the benefits for learning that the introduction of a new test can bring about. However, most recent research in this area has found that language tests affect certain aspects of teaching but not others. Thus, language tests seem to be effective in bringing about changes on teaching content but might have only limited apparent effect on teaching methodologies (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Shohamy et al.,

1996; Cheng, 2005; Luxia, 2007).

It is also believed that public examinations are employed for various purposes (Qi, 2005). They are used to place students into higher education institutes, evaluate the quality of education, and control nepotism in the allocation of scarce opportunities (Cheng, 2005; Al-Jamal & Ghadi, 2008; Ghorbani, 2012). Moreover, Manjarres (2005) mentions that the importance of National Examination cannot be denied: it is a criterion for admission into higher education; it supports the process of self-evaluation and improvement of educational institutes.

As the Iranian university entrance exams play a great role in granting unique opportunities to its test-takers and somehow guaranteeing their future lives especially for the test programs accepting candidates for higher levels such MA and Ph.D., their planning, administration, and interpretation should be done with much more care due to their washback effect that maybe positive or negative. If positive, hey presto, but if negative, instead of being helpful in terms of developing language teaching and learning, they can be detrimental.

Despite the rich literature regarding the washback effect of high-stakes tests in other countries, this field of study has not been so welcomed in Iran and the literature is really scant and seems that it is in its infancy. What follows are few studies recently done in Iran regarding washback:

- Ghonsooly, B. (2006). Washback effect of English MA exams on teaching and learning English at Iranian universities.
- Heidari, F. (2008). Alternative assessment procedures in Iranian EFL writing: washback effect of learners' attitudes.
- Razavipour, K., & Riazi, A. (2011). Washback and Iranian teacher assessment literacy.
- Tabatabaee, H., & Safikhani, A. (2011). Washback effect of the university entrance exam on EFL teachers' methodology and test development.
- Nazari, M., & Nikoopour, J. (2011). Washback effect of high-school exam on Iranian EFL learners' language learning beliefs.
- Mousavi, M., & Amiri, M. (2011). The washback effect of TEFL university entrance exam on academic behavior of students and professors.
- Ghorbani, M. R. (2012). Washback effect of the university entrance examination.
- Tahmasbi, S., & Yamini, M. (2012). Teachers' interpretation and power in a high-stake test.
- Salehi, H., & Yunus, M. (2012). Washback effect of the Iranian university entrance exam on teachers, students, and families.
- Estaji, M., & Tajddin, Z. (2012). The learner factor in washback context.
- Simin, S., & Barati, H. (2012). Changing language teaching through language testing.
- Nikoopour, J., & AminiFarsani, M. (2012). A descriptive study of EFL teachers' instructional behaviors related to Iranian university entrance exam.
- SeyedErfani, S. (2012). Comparative study of washback of IELTS and TOEFL iBT on teaching and learning activities in preparation courses in Iranian context.

- Laasaki, F. (2012). Washback effect of university entrance exam on Iranian high-school EFL pedagogy.
- Mokhtari, S. A., & Moradi Abasabadi, M. (2013). Examining the influence of Iranian school leaving test of English on the teachers' perceptions and performance.
- Ostovar Namaghi, S. A. (2013). Washback from bottom-up.

As the above researches show most of them have more concentrated on washback effect of Iranian university entrance exam on teaching procedures, teaching methodologies, and teachers' perceptions and attitudes. I think something lags behind here. The problem is that no research has been done up to here to see if Iranian English University exam observes the standard set for such a test to promote positive washback. The present study is unique in the sense that it tries to test Iranian English university exam in the light of strategies set for the creation and promotion of positive washback.

5. Methodology

5.1 Material

Since the content and structure of the Iranian English University Examination for all groups (Art, Math, Humanities and Natural Sciences) are the same, only one of them (Humanities) for the sake of its large participants has been selected for the present study. Also where needed I have made use of English final exams at 3rd level of high-school and pre-university levels plus English books used at those levels and from among suggested positive washback strategies in language testing, those proposed by J.D Brown(2000) were selected for the present study.

5.2 Instrument

The major instrument used for collecting information is "logical analysis", but to avoid subjectivity a structured interview was developed based on Brown (2000 & 2002) positive washback strategies in which through convenient sampling forty one English teachers in different parts of Mashhad (the Iranian second largest city) were interviewed on such positive washback strategies regarding (IEUEEH).

5.3 Data Analysis Procedure

The last three versions of the Iranian English university entrance examination for the Humanities (IEUEEH) was logically analyzed in the light of some of the above mentioned positive washback strategies. As for the analysis of reading comprehension skill, I have made use of Ghonsooly, B. (2012) and Nuttal, C. (2005). Then, right after discussing each strategy, the results of the interview will be presented. Finally, it should be pointed out that selection have been made among the proposed strategies because either authorities in the university entrance examination board made no contribution in giving information, some of the strategies were not apt in terms of the Iranian language teaching and language testing objectives, and finally some of the strategies were out of the patience of the present article.

6. Results and Discussions

6.1 Test Design Strategies

6.1.1 Sample Widely and Unpredictably

Normally, a test can measure only a sample of everything included in the table of specification. The sample taken should represent as far as possible the full scope of what is specified. If the sample is based on a limited area of the table of specification, then the washback effect will tend to be only on that area. Analysis of the last three versions of the IEUEEH shows that their contents were mainly based on pre-university level and little attention has been paid to high-school level, so their sample is not very wide and as a result become highly predictable.

Table 1. Comparison of the Numbers and Percentages of Grammar Items Taken from high-School and Pre-University levels in the Last Three Versions of the IEUEEH (2010-2012)

| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|-----------------------------|----------|------------|------------|
| Grammar items levels | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Pre-university | 3 (% 75) | 4 (% 100) | 4 (% 100) |
| High-school | 1 (% 25) | 0 (% 0.00) | 0 (% 0.00) |

Table 2. Comparison of the Numbers and Percentages of Vocabulary Taken from High-School and Pre-University Levels in the Last Three Versions of the IEUEEH (2010-2012)

| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|--------------------------------|-----------|-----------|------------|
| Vocabulary items levels | 35 | 37 | 45 |
| Pre-university | 28 (% 80) | 27 (% 73) | 27 (% 60)) |
| High-school | 7 (% 20) | 10 (% 27) | 18 (% 40) |

What follows is the views of the high-school and pre-university English teachers regarding the IEUEEH sample selection and its predictability.

Table 3. Teachers' Views about the Proportion of the IEUEEH Predictability

| | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------|-----------|-------------|
| Completely | 1 | %2 |
| Largely | 28 | %69 |
| Partly | 12 | %29 |
| Never | 0 | %0.00 |
| Total | 41 | %100 |

As the table shows, most of the teachers believe that the content of the recent versions of IEUEEH has been largely predictable.

Table 4. Teachers' Views about the How of IEUEEH Sample Selection

| | Frequency | Percent |
|---|-----------|---------------|
| Only pre- University | 2 | %5 |
| 3rd level of high school & Pre-university | 11 | %27 |
| High –school and Pre- University | 28 | %68 |
| Total | 41 | %100.0 |

This table indicates that most teachers think that the content of the IEUEEH should be based on both high-school and pre-university levels.

6.1.2 Designing Tests to be Criterion-Referenced

When norm-referenced testing is contrasted with criterion-referenced testing, we are actually referring to two different ways of interpreting test results. Norm-referenced measurement makes comparison between individuals for understanding the significance of any single score and each score is seen in the light of other scores, but there is also another approach to measurement which is called criterion-referenced measurement. A test which is developed to enable the test user to interpret a test result with reference to a criterion level of ability or domain of content which has been already agreed upon is referred to as criterion-referenced. The purpose of criterion-referenced test is to classify individuals based on whether or not they can perform some specific tasks satisfactorily or not. In such cases, the tests perfectly match teaching objectives, so 'teaching to the test' is permissible, for achievement of the objectives will be assured. (Bachman, 1995; McNamara, 2000; Mosavi, 1999).

Investigation of the last three versions of the IEUEEH in the light of the above strategy shows that; they have been more norm-referenced because of the following reasons:

- (1) They produce a normal distribution of candidates' scores and the candidates' scores are compared with one another. For example, if two candidates get the same scores in all subjects, save English, then their acceptance and non-acceptance to the program depends on the comparison of their English scores.
- (2) Candidates can be accepted to English or other programs, even though they may have missed a certain number of items, it depends on the degree of the difficulty of the test.
- (3) Test security is a constant problem, for they are sampled type and competitive. Teachers and students are not given full information in terms of the table of specification. For example, one year ten items are devoted to grammar, another year 5 items. One year there is a cloze text and two reading texts, another year only one short reading text.

As a result, the last three versions of the IEUEEH have not observed the above strategy to be able to promote positive washback.

6.1.3 Measuring What the Program Intends to Teach

A test will promote positive washback to program if it is based on clearly defined goals and objectives (Baily, 1996). It is believed that the main objective of Iranian ELT program is the development of reading comprehension (Yarmohammadi, 1986; Mafton, 1997; Farhady, 2000); whether such an objective has been completely and appropriately realized in the Iranian ELT curriculum is not of concern here, but attempts are made to specify whether the last three versions of the IEUEEH have tried to cover such an objective or not.

Table 5. Comparison of the Number of Items Devoted To Various Sub-tests of the Last Three Versions of the IEUEEH (2010-2012)

| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|--------------------|------|------|------|
| Total items | 25 | 25 | 25 |
| Sub-test | | | |
| Grammar | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Vocabulary | 11 | 11 | 11 |
| Reading | 10 | 10 | 10 |

Table 6. Comparison of the Number of Items Devoted to Various Reading Comprehension Sub-skills in the Last Three Versions of the IEUEEH (2010-2012).

| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|--------------------------------|------|------|------|
| Number of items | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Reading sub-skills | | | |
| Main idea construction | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Making inferences | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Comprehending words in context | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| scanning | 7 | 5 | 5 |
| Arriving at conclusion | 0 | 1 | 0 |

From the above tables, we can come to the following conclusions:

- (1) Testing discrete knowledge of grammar and vocabulary is still at the focal of interest.
- (2) Lower reading comprehension sub-skills are more at the focal of interest.

The third question in the interview was about the degree of the realization of the Iranian ELT objectives in recent versions of the IEUEEH. The results are as follows:

Table 7. Teachers' Views about the Realization of the Iranian ELT Objectives in the Last Three Versions of the IEUEEH (2010-2012)

| | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------|------------------|----------------|
| Completely | 4 | %10 |
| Largely | 14 | %34 |
| Partly | 23 | %56 |
| Never | 0 | %0.00 |
| Total | 41 | %100.0 |

Based on the above tables, it can be concluded that the last three versions of IEUEEH partly observed the above positive strategy and the likely washback has been more negative rather than positive.

6.1.4 Basing the Test on Sound Theoretical Principles

The shift from language form to language use has placed new demands on language teaching, so too has it placed new demands on language testing. A test will promote positive washback to the extent that it is based on sound theoretical principles which are widely accepted in the field. It is almost impossible that a test which is based on outmoded constructs produce positive washback because, in many parts of the world, the restricted view of linguistic competence has been replaced by the broader view of communicative competence, it is important that test providers develop mechanisms by which test batteries can remain current (Bailey, 1996).

Analysis of the last three versions of the IEUEEH indicated that they included three main sections: grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension. Much of the volume of these versions were devoted to discrete testing of vocabulary and grammar and some test- items dealt with the evaluation of reading comprehension not in its real sense, but just focusing more on lower-order reading comprehension skills to the negligence of most of the higher-order reading comprehension ones. If we accept that the main objective of Iranian ELT program is the development of reading comprehension skill in its communicative sense, then testing discrete knowledge of vocabulary and grammar (structural based) does not guarantee the mastery of reading comprehension skill. So again the washback effect has been more negative here rather than positive

6.2 Test Content Strategy

6.2.1 Testing the Abilities Whose Development You Want to Encourage

By this is meant that language testing should attempt to test the abilities that the teaching program intends to develop. For example, if the program intends to develop reading comprehension, then language testing should test reading comprehension. It seems quite easy, yet it is surprising how often it is not done in practice. A general tendency in language testing is 'test what it is easiest to test rather than what is most important to test' (Hughes, 2003).

Analysis of the last three versions of the IEUEEH showed that the above strategy had not been

observed to promote positive washback. Considering the development of reading comprehension skill as the main objective of Iranian ELT program, the last three versions of the IEUEEH have focused more on the assessment of some special aspects of reading comprehension skill, that is, grammar and vocabulary, scanning, guessing the meaning of unfamiliar words in context and less attention had been paid to testing other important reading comprehension skills such as skimming, coming to conclusion comparing and contrasting, describing cause and effect relations, etc.

Table 8. Comparison of the Number of Items Devoted to Testing Grammar, Vocabulary, and Reading Comprehension in the Last Three Versions of the IEUEEH (2010-2012)

| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|-----------------------|------|------|------|
| Total items | 25 | 25 | 25 |
| Sub-tests | | | |
| Grammar | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Vocabulary | 11 | 11 | 11 |
| Reading Comprehension | 10 | 10 | 10 |

Table 9. Comparison of the Number of Items Devoted to Testing Various Reading Comprehension Sub-Skills in the Last Three Versions of the IEUEEH (2010-2012)

| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|-----------------------------------|------|------|------|
| Total items | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Reading sub-skills | | | |
| Scanning | 7 | 5 | 5 |
| Skimming | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| Guessing words meaning in Context | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Main idea construction | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Paraphrasing | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Comparing and contrasting | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Evaluation | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Forming conclusion | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Describing cause and effect | 0 | 0 | 0 |

The likely washback is that most teaching and learning activities, as the researcher himself experienced it after nearly 15 years of teaching English at different levels, have been centered on grammar and vocabulary and reading comprehension is now considered more a kind of translation activity, for discrete knowledge of grammar and vocabulary are the things more demanded of the students in the Iranian English university entrance examination.

6.2.2 Using More Open-Ended Item (As Opposed to Selected- Response like Multiple-Choice)

There are two major types of test items: selected-response items also called ‘fixed-response items’ (McNamara, 2000) and constructed- response items also called ‘free-response items’ or ‘open-ended items’.

Selected-response item has got three common formats: true-false, multiple-choice, and matching. Their main characteristics are: they can be reliably scored and allow for adequate content sampling. Among selected-response items, multiple-choice items are frequently and extensively used, for they can not only provide diagnostic information, but also if the items are properly prepared, as is not usual, can measure higher-order cognitive outcomes.

Constructed-response items (also open-ended items) demand candidates to produce their own responses to questions without having to choose answers from among alternatives. The extent of responses vary considerably, say, from one-word answer to essay one (Bachman, 1995). The philosophy behind using constructed-response item is that they can effectively measure higher-level or complex learning outcomes ranging from comparing and contrasting, evaluating, forming conclusions to describing cause and effect relationships, etc. This does not mean that higher-level learning outcomes cannot be tested through multiple-choice items. It can; but as previously mentioned, developing multiple-choice items for the assessment of such kind of knowledge, if not impossible, is very difficult. However, as it was mentioned before, problems of reliability and practicality restrict the use of open-ended items, especially when large numbers of candidates are to be tested (Wiersma, 1990; Bachman and Palmer, 1997).

Table 10. Comparison of the Number of Items Devoted to Open-ended and Selected-Response Items in the Last Three Versions of the IEUEEH (2010-2012)

| | 2010 | | 2011 | | 2012 | |
|-----------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|-------------------|
| Total items | 25 | | 25 | | 25 | |
| Item form | Open ended | Selected response | Open ended | Selected response | Open ended | Selected response |
| Sub-test | | | | | | |
| Grammar | | 4 | | 4 | | 4 |
| Vocabulary | | 11 | | 11 | | 11 |
| Reading comprehension | | 10 | | 10 | | 10 |

The above table shows that in the last three versions of the IEUEEH no open-ended items have been used and the likely washback has been negative. Of course it should be mentioned that the reason for not using such items in the Iranian university entrance examination is mainly because of the large number of candidates who take part in such examinations, for including open-ended items in such examinations produces more serious problems of practicality (e.g. scoring or interpretation).

6.2.3 Making Examination Reflect Full Curriculum, not Merely a Limited Aspect

By this strategy the test constructor should give suitable weights to what the curriculum intends to teach. If this condition is not satisfied, or a test be developed on some particular parts of a curriculum, the likely washback tends to be on those parts which have been given too much weight.

Analysis of the last three versions of the IEUEEH showed that they mainly reflected the curriculum used at the pre-university level and less or sometimes no attention had been given to the high-school level. The following tables provide more detailed information.

Table 11. Comparison of the Number of Grammar Items Taken from Pre-University and High-School Levels in the Last Three Versions of the IEUEEH (2010-2012)

| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|--------------------|------|------|------|
| Total items | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| Levels | | | |
| Pre-university | 3 | 4 | 4 |
| High-school | 1 | 0 | 0 |

Table 12. Comparison of the Number of Vocabulary Taken from Pre-University and High-School Levels in the Last Three Versions of the IEUEEH (2010-2012)

| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|--------------------|------|------|------|
| Total items | 35 | 37 | 47 |
| Levels | | | |
| Pre-university | 28 | 27 | 27 |
| High-school | 7 | 10 | 18 |

The above tables reveals that in the last three versions of IEUEEH much attention has been given to pre-university with 8 lessons and less attention to high-school with 22 lessons, so they haven't reflected the full curriculum and produced negative washback in terms of this strategy.

6.2.4 Using Authentic Tasks and Texts

A test will produce positive washback to the learner and to the program to the extent that it uses authentic tasks. But what does authenticity mean? Bachman and Palmer (1997:23) define authenticity as the degree of correspondence of the characteristics of a given language test task to the features of a target language task. Also, Doye (1991, in Bailey, 1996:287) states that an authentic test is one that reproduces a real life situation in order to examine the student's ability to cope with it.

As it has been frequently mentioned throughout this work, Iranian language teaching authorities believe that the main objective of Iranian ELT program is the development of reading comprehension skill. So Iranian English university entrance examination as a high-stake test which largely influences teaching

and learning activities and the life-chances of testees should include tasks and texts that students are going to face in real-life situation. A test of reading comprehension skill to be authentic, it should observe the following criteria. Besides testing the underlying knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, lower reading activities (word recognition, syntactic processing and phonemic /graphemic decoding) such tests should include higher order ones (main idea construction, evaluation, compare/contrast, inferencing, etc.). Also such tests should make use of original texts not aboriginal ones (shortened and simplified) to make the test takers to breathe in real situations as much as possible (Ghonsooly, 2012).

Table 13. Comparison of Items Devoted to Testing Lower-Order and Higher-Order Reading Activities in the Last Three Versions of the IEUEEH (2010-2012)

| | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 |
|-----------------------------------|------|------|------|
| Total items | 10 | 10 | 10 |
| Reading activities | | | |
| Lower-order | | | |
| Scanning | 7 | 5 | 5 |
| Finding pronoun referents | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Guessing words meaning in context | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Higher-order | | | |
| Main idea construction | 1 | 2 | 2 |
| Inferencing | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Evaluation | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Arriving at conclusion | 0 | 1 | 0 |

Table 14. Teachers' Views about the Type of Reading Comprehension Tasks in the Last Three Versions of the IEUEEH (2010-2012)

| | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------------|-----------|---------------|
| Only higher-order | 16 | %39.0 |
| Only lower –order | 22 | %54 |
| Both higher and lower – order | 3 | %7 |
| Total | 41 | %100.0 |

Table 15. Teachers' Views about the Authenticity of the Reading Comprehension Texts in the Last Three Versions of the IEUEEH

| | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------------------|-----------|---------|
| Original | 2 | % 5 |
| Shortened and simplified | 28 | % 68 |

| | | |
|--------------|----|-------|
| Simplified | 7 | % 17 |
| Shortened | 4 | % 10 |
| Total | 41 | % 100 |

Based on the above tables, it can be concluded that most of the reading comprehension tasks and texts used in the last three versions of the IEUEEH had not been authentic and the likely washback has been negative in terms of the above positive washback strategy.

6.3 Logistical Strategies

6.3.1 Providing Detailed and Timely Feedback to Teachers and Schools on Levels of Pupils' Performance

Based on this strategy, public examinations should provide detailed and timely feedback to schools on levels of students' performances and areas of difficulty and such information should be diagnostic, that is, it should be ample, detailed and innovative, and involves a variety of language dimensions within the four skills. The diagnosis should consist of students' performances in five dimensions: General performance in each of the language skills, say, reading comprehension; specific performance in sub-skills within each skill (e.g. macro-and micro-skills in reading comprehension); comparative performance relative to other schools; and both itemized and qualitative assessment of all individual test items, focusing on strengths and weaknesses of the schools (Shohamy, 1992).

Experiences show that the Iranian English university entrance examination board does not provide schools with such feedback as comparing their performances with other schools and analysis of their own student's levels of performance. Only students are provided with general single scores which is not of much help, for it does not make students aware of the problematic areas.

Table 16. Teachers' Views about the Detailed Feedback that They Receive from the Iranian English University Entrance Examination Board

| | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------|-----------|---------|
| Every ten years | 2 | % 5 |
| Every few years | 1 | % 2 |
| Every year | 0 | % 0 |
| Never | 38 | % 93 |
| Total | 41 | % 100 |

It can be concluded that the recent versions of the IEUEEH have not had the necessary condition to create and promote positive washback in this regard.

6.3.2 Making Sure Teachers and Administrators are Involved Indifferent Phases of the Testing Process Because They Are the People Who Are to Make Changes

Another requirement for successful utilization of test results is the involvement of principals and teachers in different phases of the assessment process, because they are the people expected to carry out change.

Shohamy (1992) believes that testing is a collaborative process, that is, it involves cooperation between the school faculty and the assessment team. The school defines its curriculum and objectives and the tests are tailor-made by the assessment team according to this curriculum or objectives. The following figure provides a schematic representation of the relationship.

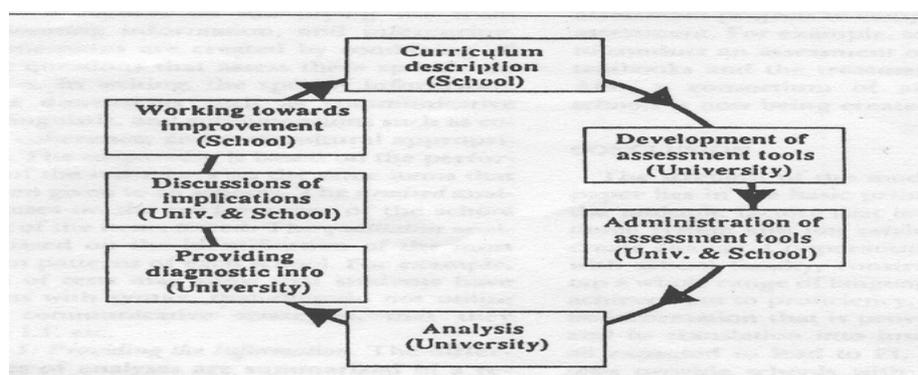


Figure 1. A Model of Cooperation between Assessment Teams and Teachers

Table 17. Teachers' Views about Their Involvement in Various Testing Processes of the IEUEEH (2010-2012)

| | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------|-----------|---------------|
| Always | 0 | %0.00 |
| Often | 1 | %2 |
| Sometimes | 4 | %10 |
| Never | 36 | %88 |
| Total | 41 | %100.0 |

As it is clear from the above table, 69% of the English pre-university teachers believed that they were never involved in different phases of the testing process, so the last three versions of the IEUEEH have more produced negative washback regarding the above strategy.

6.3.3 Providing Detailed Score Reporting

Public examinations can create and promote positive washback both to the learners and to the program representatives if they provide more detailed score reports than are typically available, that is, general scores. As mentioned before, Shohamy (1992) pointed out that to promote positive washback,

assessment information must be detailed, innovative, relevant and diagnostic, and that it must address a variety of dimensions rather than being collapsed into one general score. For example, the G-TELP (General Test of English Language Proficiency) is one available English language test which does provide feedback to the learners in the form of a detailed score report. The G-TELP Score Report provides test-takers with information about their performance, not only on the sub-tests of listening, reading, vocabulary, grammar, etc., but also with relatively specific feedback, in percentage terms, about their performance on the tasks and structures assessed in these tests (Bailey, 1996). The following tables are suggested for a hypothetical test-taker participating in the Iranian English university entrance examination to promote positive washback in terms of the above strategy.

Table 18. Suggested Score Reporting Fort a Hypothetical Test-taker Performance in Each Sub-Test of the IEUEEH

| | Reading | Grammar | Vocabulary |
|-------------------------|---------|---------|------------|
| Total score | 40 | 16 | 44 |
| Hypothetical test-taker | 16 | 8 | 24 |

Table 19. Suggested Score Reporting Format: A Hypothetical Test-Taker Performance in Reading Comprehension of the forthcoming IEUEEH

| | Total scores |
|------------------------------------|--------------|
| Reading sub-skills | 40 |
| Main | 0 |
| Inferencing | 4 |
| Scanning | 8 |
| Finding referents of pronouns | 0 |
| Guessing words' meaning in context | 4 |
| Arriving at conclusion | 0 |
| Paraphrasing | 0 |
| Total performance | 16 |

Table 20. Teachers' Views about the How of Score Reporting of IEUEEH

| | Frequency | Percent |
|---|-----------|---------|
| General single scores | 3 | % 7 |
| General single scores on each sub-test | 6 | % 15 |
| General single scores plus detailed score reporting | 32 | %78 |
| Total | 41 | % 100 |

Table 21. The Present Status of English Score Reporting in the IEUEEH

| | English |
|---------------------------------|----------------|
| Total score | % 100 |
| Hypothetical test-taker's score | % 65 |

The above tables show that most Iranian English teachers believe that authorities in the Iranian English university entrance examination board should provide not only general scores, but also detailed score reporting to be as informative as possible, but this has not been the case and test-takers are only provided with a so-called vague general single scores. Therefore, the recent versions of the IEUEEH have not observed the above criterion to create and promote positive washback.

7. Implications

- The content of the Iranian English university entrance examination should be developed both on high-school and pre-university levels in order not to be predictable.
- To reflect the Iranian ELT objective, that is, the development of reading comprehension skill, the Iranian English university entrance examination, in addition to testing the underlying knowledge of reading comprehension (i.e. grammar and vocabulary), should directly engage test-takers in reading activities through testing both lower-order and higher order reading activities and using more authentic reading texts.
- Authorities in the Iranian English university entrance examination should inform teachers and students about the table of specification and purpose of the test.
- Authorities in the English university entrance examination should provide schools and teachers with detailed and timely feedback on levels of student's performances and areas of difficulty.
- There should be a constant collaboration among Iranian English teachers' representatives, university entrance examination authorities, course designers and material providers.
- Authorities should provide schools, teachers and students with detailed score reporting regarding students' performance.
- With the existing situation that the number of applicants matching and for sure in near future becoming lower than the capacity of universities, criterion-referencing is the best solution. To make university entrance examination criterion-referenced, authorities should increase the universities' facilities to accommodate more applicants.
- Iranian English university entrance examination should try to reflect current views of language testing.

8. Conclusion

The present study tried to qualitatively analyze the recent versions of the Iranian English university

entrance examination (IEUEE) in the light of positive washback strategies proposed by J.D Brown (2000). As discussed before, this field of language testing in Iran is in its infancy and few researches have been done in this regard. Among those few washback studies being done, most of them deal with the effect of the IEUEE on Iranian ELT program without knowing whether such a test observes the standards set for the creation and promotion of positive washback. This study is unique in the sense that it is the first washback research being done in Iran evaluating the IEUEE against positive washback strategies whose results are as follows: Regarding test design positive washback strategies, findings showed that they haven't been widely sampled; suffering from lack of a sound theory; being norm-referenced; and haven't followed objectives of the Iranian ELT program. As for test content strategies, they haven't been able to encourage the abilities being at the focal of Iranian ELT program; adopting more selected-response items; reflecting limited aspects of the Iranian ELT curriculum; and stressing more on inauthentic tasks and texts to the negligence of higher-order language learning tasks. Also, in terms of logistical strategies, they haven't provided detailed and timely feedback to the learners, teachers, and school administrators; haven't involved teachers and administrators in different phases of testing process; and ignored detailed score reporting to the target people.

Finally, the results of the interview with Iranian English teachers show that the IEUEEH is highly predictable due to its narrow sample selection; doesn't support the Iranian ELT objectives; deals just with lower-order reading comprehension tasks; is highly inauthentic; doesn't provide detailed feedback to Iranian English teachers; and doesn't involve Iranian English teachers in various testing process of the IEUEEH.

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Appendix A

2012 Sample of Iranian English University Entrance Examination for the Humanities

زبان انگلیسی عمومی انسانی 91

Directions: Choose the word or phrase (1), (2), (3), or (4) that best completes each sentence. Then mark the correct choice on your answer sheet.

76- The topic suggested by the teacher was ----- one that attracted us all.

1) interesting 2) interested 3) an interesting 4) an interested

77- I was surprised that he looked ----- good after his recent illness.

1) so 2) as 3) such 4) enough

78- A: Tom didn't come to the party.

B: He ----- the message.

1) may not receive 2) should not receive

3) should not have received 4) may not have received

79- They were sad because they had lost all the games in the -----.

1) comparison 2) competition 3) involvement 4) procedure

80- My parents will ----- my mail to China while I am working there.

1) stick 2) forward 3) compose 4) mention

81- Her work performance didn't come up to her employer's -----.

1) features 2) amounts 3) situations 4) expectations

82- I believe children must be ----- in road safety.

1) instructed 2) evaluated 3) predicted 4) prevented

83- No one had been forced to help; they were all there on a/an ----- basis.

1) aware 2) ordinary 3) voluntary 4) precious

84- With the help of technology, skiing is no longer ----- a winter game.

1) briefly 2) directly 3) primarily 4) seriously

85- What I eat for breakfast ----- a piece of bread and a little bit of cheese only.

1) makes up 2) insists on 3) consists of 4) keeps up with

PART B: Cloze Test

Directions: Read the following passage and decide which choice (1), (2), (3), or (4) best fits each space. Then mark the correct choice on your answer sheet.

This article is divided into two sections, the first of which deals with gas as a state of (86) ----- and the second with gas as a fuel. Petrol is also frequently (87) ----- to as "gas", (88) ----- in North America. Many of the gases (89) ----- in this article have (90) ----- articles of their own.

86- 1) pressure 2) volume 3) force 4) matter

87- 1) referred 2) arranged 3) described 4) observed

88- 1) artificially 2) especially 3) interchangeably 4) carefully

89- 1) mention 2) are mentioning 3) are mentioned 4) mentioned

90- 1) separate 2) private 3) ancient 4) straight

PART C: Reading Comprehension

Directions: Read the following two passages and answer the questions by choosing the best choice (1), (2), (3), or (4). Then mark the correct choice on your answer sheet.

PASSAGE 1:

The first time I came to the Herault, after a ten-hour train ride from Paris to Montpellier, I caught a bus to the old village where my friend Sarah had bought a house. When I got there an hour and a half later, despite the fact that I'd been riding on a modern bus, I had the sense that I'd moved back 700 years.

Sarah's house is made of stone, a few hundred years old, typical of the kind of place for sale cheaply here. Like actually all the village houses it's attached to the neighbouring ones — so although the village is small it feels heavily populated, everybody living close together, always somebody leaning out of the window or sitting in front of the door. Inside, it is dark and cool. When Sarah bought the house, it had cold running water, some missing floors, and the fireplace didn't work.

91- How long did it take the writer to get to the place where her friend's house was?

1) Ten hours 2) Longer than a day

3) One and a half hours 4) Eleven and a half hours

92- All of the following are true about Sarah's house EXCEPT that it was -----.

1) made of stone 2) built over 700 years ago

3) connected to other houses 4) located in a crowded village

93- It can be understood from the passage that people living in the village -----.

1) didn't seem to know Sarah 2) offered their houses for sale at a low price

3) were probably friendly towards each other 4) went into their house when the writer arrived

94- It can be understood from the passage that when Sarah bought her house it was -----.

1) good enough to live in 2) required some repairs

3) in the same condition as the other houses 4) older than the other houses in the village

95- Which of the following questions does the passage answer?

1) Did anyone help Sarah to fix her house?

2) How did the author happen to know Sarah?

3) Why did the author travel 700 years back in time?

4) Did the author walk from Montpellier to her friend's house?

PASSAGE 2:

Exercises that require total body involvement improve and maintain fitness most effectively — for example, jogging, running, swimming, cycling, and fast walking. Organized games and sports that have long rest periods within the play design have only a little influence on fitness. Programs especially planned to help individuals become fit are offered in different places: schools and gyms, private clubs and studios, and special, professionally organized clinics that pay attention to people with problems related to the heart or lungs. The individual must be careful in choosing an exercise program and should make sure it is staffed by experts in physical education or medicine.

Normal, healthy individuals may plan their own exercise programs. The general rule is to exercise only until you feel very tired—that is, until breathing becomes labored, circulation seems not enough, or tiredness influences performance. People with health problems caused by heart attacks, strokes, and illness should see a doctor before choosing an exercise program.

96- According to the information in the passage, if you participate in a sport that makes you have long rest periods, you -----.

1) cannot expect your fitness to improve much

2) should do your best to avoid total body involvement

3) need to exercise in different places in order to improve your fitness

4) had better do running, fast walking etc. during the rest period to keep your body warm and fit

97- According to the passage, if you have a heart problem, you are advised to -----.

1) exercise in places that design activities clinically appropriate for you

- 2) play organized games so that others can take care of you if you face any trouble
- 3) often see a doctor to measure the amount of the progress you have made in fitness
- 4) engage in activities that require total body involvement so that all the pressure would not be on your heart

98- It can be said that paragraph 1 is mainly written to -----.

- 1) advise 2) correct a wrong idea
- 3) mention the benefits of games 4) compare daily exercise with organized sports

99- The word “labored” in paragraph 2 is closest in meaning to -----.

- 1) deep 2) difficult 3) dangerous 4) regular

100- The general rule given in paragraph 2 is for those who -----.

- 1) need to see a doctor 2) exercise professionally
- 3) have no health problems 4) cannot plan their own exercise programs

Appendix B

Sample of Iranian Pre-university English final exam

In the Name of God

Name: class: ENGLISH 1 Time: 100 min lessons: 1-4

A. Fill in the blanks with the given words. There is one extra word.(4 points)

*prevent – protect -efficiently - prediction – emphasis - shake – permission –
~~emergency – crossing~~*

1. Earthquake Is a future possibility.
2. The car suddenly stopped and the whole engine started to
3. When you do something you do it well and with no waste of time, money, or energy.
4. Some habits like your arms, when giving a speech, might have a bad effect on the audience.
5. Did he change the volume of his voice for?
6. Wear a hat to your head against the sun.
7. In a(n) case, you should break the window with this hammer.
8. You’ll never leave without

B. Complete the following sentences by unscrambled the words in parentheses. (2 points)

- 9.** You can control your (sssnneoruv) if you breathe deeply several times.
10. In my first class I will(ecrouitdn) some of the topics we will be studying this year.
11. Some of the plants are in danger of(xttiinnoce).
12. Aerobic exercise makes your (ssuclme) strong.

C. Functions: Complete the following sentences with your own words. (2 points)

- 13.** Aerobics a word for needing oxygen.(defining)
14. We decided to go to the restaurant we had no food at home.(explaining)
15. your audience by asking questions, talking to them directly, and getting them interested.(instructing)
16. Climateto the average of a region's weather over a period of time.(defining)

D. Match column A with B. There is an extra item in column B. (3 points)

| <i>A</i> | <i>B</i> |
|--------------|-------------------------------------|
| 17.save | a)move sth up and down, |
| 18.ignore | b)physical harm to sth |
| 19. rattle | c)move sth with a sound |
| 20.gesture | d)not to pay attention to sb or sth |
| 21.effective | e)meaningful body movements |
| 22. damage | f)having the wanted result |
| | g)not waste |

E. Select the best choice: 1, 2, 3, or 4. (6.5 points)

- 23.** Anyone that wire will get an electric shock.
 Touched touching who touch who touching
- 24.** Most of the suggestionsat the meeting were not very practical.
 which made which are making made making
- 25.** Put feeling and energy into your voice
 Practice to practicing by practicing to practice When I had to make an emergency phone call, Mr. Zahiri let me his phone.
 using used uses use
- 26.** He's made..... part in artistic activities.
 taking takes take to take
- 27.** There may belittle animals that you can't see them with naked eyes.
 such enough too so

G. Read the following passage and answer the questions that follow. (2.5 points)

There are five billion people in the world and they live in different corners of it. They live on the snow and ice and also in the tropical jungles. They have climbed the highest mountains, walked on the sea bed and even visited the moon. Man is more than other animals in number and also the most powerful of all of them on earth. However, in many ways animals can do things better than we can. Some of them can smell, hear, and see better than us. Birds can fly thousands of miles away and return to the same place every year. However, there is one thing above all that makes people and animals different. People love to talk - talk - talk. We are great talkers. We can send messages in so many ways. Most important of all we can write, so we can send messages through time. We have an understanding of past and future, not just present.

- 40.** *Human beings and animals are mainly different because humans can*
- | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| 3)do everything better than animals | 1) live in very cold and very hot places |
| 4)fly to very high and far places | 2) send messages in different ways |
- 41.** *To be able “to send messages through time” means to have the ability to*
- | | |
|--|-------------------------------------|
| 3)talk about past, present, and future | 1) speak to both humans and animals |
| 4)speak about time | 2) send messages in different ways |
- 42.** *The word “them” in line 5 refers to*
- | | |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| 3)humans and animals | 1) many ways |
| 4)animals in the world | 2) corners of the earth |
- 43.** *Some animals are better than humans in*
- | | |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 3)finding good ways for talking | 1) living on the earth |
| 4)using their nose, ears and eyes | 2) flying to distant places |
- 44.** *Man can send message through time because he can*
- | | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 2)be a great talker | 1) write his ideas |
| 4)understand everything | 3) speak about different things |

H. Put the following sentences in order and make a meaningful paragraph. Show the correct order with letters A-E in each parenthesis. (2.5 points)

- 45.** () They fear this even more than death.
- 46.** () Learn to control it.
- 47.** () Everyone has a certain amount of anxiety when talking to a group.
- 48.** () Most people are afraid of speaking in public.
- 49.** () But the point is not to end anxiety.

I. Read the following article quickly and match each paragraph with one of the headings on the right. (2.5 points)

| <i>Paragraph</i> | <i>Headings</i> |
|---|---|
| <p>50. The child in the hospital bed was just waking up after having his tonsils taken out. His throat hurt, and he was scared. However, the young nurse standing by his bed smiled so cheerfully that the little boy smiled back. He forgot to be afraid. The young nurse was May Paxton and she was deaf.</p> | <p><i>a)getting familiar with a good friend</i></p> |
| <p>51. May Paxton graduated from the Missouri School for the Deaf at Fulton near the year 1909. Three years later she went to see Dr. Katherine B. Richardson about becoming a nurse. Dr. Richardson was one of the founders of Mercy Hospital of Kansas City, Missouri. She had never heard of a deaf nurse. Dr. Richardson told May that her salary would be very small and that the work would be arduous. However, May said that hard work did not frighten <u>her</u>. Dr. Richardson was impressed with her, and accepted May as a student nurse.</p> | <p><i>b)starting a job</i></p> |
| <p>52. Dr. Richardson never regretted her decision. In fact, she was so pleased with May's work that she later accepted two other deaf women as student nurses. The first was Miss Marian Finch of Aberdeen, South Dakota, who was hard of hearing. The second was Miss Lillie "Bessie" Speaker of St. Joseph, Missouri. These three were called "the silent angels of Mercy Hospital" during the time they worked there.</p> | <p><i>c)The effect of kindness</i></p> |
| <p>53. May and Marian did not know each other before Marian was hired by the hospital. When Marian first came to the hospital, Dr. Richardson introduced May to Marian. <u>She</u> showed them to the room they were to share. During the next two days, the two girls wrote notes to each other. Finally, other nurses asked Marian if she knew that May was deaf. Marian ran to the bedroom and asked May in sign if she really was deaf. May answered in sign. Then, as the joke sunk in, the two girls burst into laughter.</p> | <p><i>d)The influence on others' decisions</i></p> |
| <p>54. May was always conscientious about following orders. Only once did she disobey Dr. Richardson. It took a lot of time to care for all the sick children, as a result, Dr. Richardson asked the nurses not to take the time to hold the new babies when they were crying. However, May hated to see the babies cry. When Dr. Richardson was not around, she found time to hold them. This small change helped the nursery to run much more smoothly. When Dr. Richardson discovered what May was doing, she recognized that May's actions had improved the nursery, and decided to overlook May's disobedience.</p> | <p><i>e)believing in others</i></p> |

55. Dr. Richardson often spoke of her faith in the girls' ability to learn nursing. She wrote to May, "For three years, you have been with us ... It is wonderful to me that no man, woman or child ever, to my knowledge, made a complaint against you ... "

f)The results of ignoring others' faults

J. Now read the above article quickly again and decide whether the following statements are True (T), false (F) or not mentioned (N). (2.5 points)

- 56.** () May was an honest and hardworking nurse.
- 57.** () Dr. Richardson asked the nurses never pay attention to the new babies.
- 58.** () Marian and Bessie were hired by the hospital after May at the same time.
- 59.** () May had a good impression on Dr. Richardson.
- 60.** () Because of May's actions, Dr. Richardson and others nurses left the nursery.

Good Luck