

Iranian parents' Perceptions of High-stakes Tests

Hadi Salehi⁺¹, Sara kashefian-Naeeni², Atefesadat Mirsaedi³ and Zeinab Salehi⁴

^{1,2,4} Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Isfahan, Iran

³ Department of linguistics, Khorasgan (Isfahan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

Abstract. The Entrance Exam of the Universities (EEU) in Iran is a competitive high-stakes test that affects all the test stakeholders, the curriculum and the whole educational context. This effect, positive or negative, is literally called washback. This paper aimed to report the findings of a study on the Iranian parents' perceptions of the EEU. To this end, a survey questionnaire including 24 items was developed based on two main themes of parents' activities at home to help their children pass the EEU and parents' direct attitudes towards the EEU. The questionnaire was randomly administered to 30 Iranian parents whose children were in pre-university level. The results indicated that the EEU directly and negatively influences the Iranian parents and their children. Although the majority of the surveyed parents have a negative attitude towards the high-stakes exam of the EEU, they do whatever they can to help their children cope with this exam. The findings also justify the necessity of conducting research studies on the other stakeholders of this high-stakes test.

Key words: Washback, Entrance Exam of the Universities (EEU), Parents, High-stakes test, Stakeholder, Perceptions

1. Research background

In the literature about language testing, the property of the test that concerns its effects on teaching and learning is commonly known as washback. Washback sometimes referred to as backwash can be generally understood as the effect of an examination on teaching and learning (Cheng, 2003). Not all scholars, however, have agreed to its definition. Alderson and Wall (1993) restricted the use of the term "washback" to "classroom behaviors of teachers and learners rather than the nature of printed and other pedagogic material" (p. 118). They would also consider washback to be what teachers and learners do that "they would not necessarily otherwise do" (p. 117). Messick (1996) states that in order to consider washback, good or bad teaching has to be "evidentially linked to the introduction and use of the test" (p. 16). According to Wall (1997), there is a clear distinction between test impact and washback. The former refers to the effect of a test on "individuals, policies or practices, within the classroom, the school, the educational system or society as a whole" (cited in Cheng and Curtis, 2004, p.4). Other researchers (Andrews, Fullilove & Wong, 2002) do not make that distinction and they consider that narrow and wider effects can be included under the term washback. In this study, washback is understood in the wider sense including what some scholars call 'impact'.

+ Corresponding author. Tel.: (0060176538260)
E-mail address: hadisalehi1358@yahoo.com

The focus of this study is on the washback associated with a high-stakes test. High stakes tests are tests whose results 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 (Gipps, 1994). Their primary use is ‘. . . to ration future opportunity as the basis for determining admission to the next layer of education or to employment opportunities’ (Chapman and Snyder, 2000, p. 458). In this case, the high-stakes test is the Entrance Examination of Universities (EEU), taken by approximately more than one million Iranian candidates each year in the final year of their secondary schooling. Success in the EEU is a prerequisite for entry to tertiary education. Hence, the results can play a significant role in decisions on university admission.

2. Research context

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, the educational system of the country has gone under qualitative and quantitative changes. The structure of the education system in Iran is now basically divided into five cycles namely, pre-school, primary, middle, secondary and tertiary. A critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Iranian education system requires an in-depth analysis of its structure, which goes beyond the scope of this study.

In Iran, as in many other countries where a university entrance exam is the sole criterion for student selection, limited space and resources have restricted many talented and enthusiastic applicants seeking access to higher education (Kamyab, 2009). Therefore, the phenomenon of the university entrance exam has caused discontent and conflict. In June each year, high school graduates in Iran take the stringent centralized university entrance exam seeking a place in one of the state universities. The exam is so stringent that normally students spend a year preparing for it; those who fail are allowed to repeat the test in the following years until they pass it. EEU is a comprehensive, 4-hour multiple-choice exam that covers all subjects taught in Iranian high schools—from math and science to Islamic studies and foreign language. The English section of the test includes 25 multiple-choice items and a cloze test. The students are given 20 minutes, as required by this section of the test, to react to the questions.

According to Kamyab (2009), EEU, especially in recent years, has further contributed to the massive brain drain from Iran and has created psychological and social problems such as anxiety, boredom, and hopelessness among the youth who fail the test. One of the most important drawbacks is the nature of the test itself. As in many other countries where only a long multiple-choice, mostly memory-based exam is used to select qualified applicants to enter universities, Iranian schools have been turned into factories for exam cramming.

3. Method

This study employed a survey research to investigate the washback effect of the EEU on the Iranian parents. The participants consisted of 30 Iranian parents whose children were in pre-university level preparing themselves to sit for the upcoming EEU. In fact, the questionnaire was administered to 50 parents but the total return rate was 60 % (30 questionnaires were returned).

The questionnaire was originally designed in English; however, it was issued to the parents in Persian in order to minimize misunderstanding and validity and reliability problems caused by the language factor (Geisinger, 1994). The questionnaire was translated using back translation method from English to Persian back to English. Comparison between the two English and Persian versions (the original and the translated versions) was conducted to examine the exactness of the translations. The translated questionnaire was given to two professors in the field of English-Persian translation, and they were

requested to judge the translated questionnaire. Following the suggestions from the experts, the first draft of the questionnaire was revised and the necessary changes were made in the second draft.

The questionnaire consisted of two parts and 24 items altogether. The first part included four items related to the gender, level of education, frequency of the school visit, and the numbers of private tutorials the parents considered for their child. All the items in this part were designed on a multiple-choice basis. The second part consisted of two sections related to the parents' activities at home to help their children pass the EEU and the parents' direct attitudes towards the EEU. The first section including 9 items was designed on a five-point Likert scale of frequency, where five = always, four = often, three = sometimes, two = seldom and one = never, and the second section with 11 items was designed on a five-point Likert scale of agreement, where five = strongly agree, four = agree, three = undecided, two = disagree, and one = strongly disagree.

4. Findings and discussion

The findings are presented in three sections. First, the demographic data are presented, which is then followed by the respondents' activities at home to help their children pass the EEU. In the last section, the results are presented according to the parents' direct attitudes towards the EEU.

4.1. Demographic data

Eighty percent of the respondents were female and 20 % of them were male. When the surveyed parents were asked about their level of education, the majority of them (90 %) had diploma and bachelor degree, and just 10 % of them had post graduate degrees. The majority of the parents (83.3 %) visited the schools in which their children were studying almost once in a semester. This clearly indicates the parents' direct attention to their children's educational status.

The obtained results for the number of weekly private tutorials the parents consider for their children showed that about one-third of the respondents (30 %) did not consider any weekly private tutorials for their children probably due to the financial pressure of attending these classes on their families. However, less than half of them (46.7 %) sent their children to private classes once or twice a week. About one-fourth of the parents (23.3 %) also considered more than three sessions of weekly private classes for their children. This clearly indicates the parents' attention to English learning, necessarily due to the impact of the EEU on the parents and their children.

4.2. Parents' activities at home to help their children pass the EEU

This category aimed to investigate the activities the parents carry out at home to help their children pass the EEU. The parents were asked to state how often they do the following nine activities at home. As Table 1 shows the items in descending order according to the mean scores, all activities excluding the last one (Remind him/her of the EEU date) have mean scores above 3.5, indicating that they were frequently carried out by the parents at home. The majority of the surveyed parents frequently or always provide a suitable and calm environment for their children, motivate them to study for the EEU, help them indirectly to pass the EEU and provide them with supplementary materials. In general, the parents do whatever they can to help their children cope with the EEU. This clearly shows the explicit pressure the EEU puts on the families especially when their children are studying in pre-university center and preparing themselves to sit for the upcoming EEU.

Table 1. Parents' activities at home to help their child pass the EEU according to the mean scores

Statements	Mean
------------	------

Provide a suitable environment for your child to study for the EEU	4.30
Motivate your child to study for the EEU	4.00
Provide him/her with supplementary materials	3.90
Help him/her indirectly to pass the EEU	3.86
Turn off the radio/TV for his/her sake	3.70
Keep the house environment calm	3.66
Talk to your child about the importance of the EEU	3.66
Encourage your child to be aware of the EEU	3.53
Remind him/her of the EEU date	2.33

4.3. Parents' direct attitudes towards the EEU

This category aimed to investigate the parents' direct attitudes towards the EEU. The parents were asked to state how they agreed with the following 11 statements. Ten items out of eleven got the mean scores above 3 indicating that the parents to some extent agreed with the following items. Just when the surveyed parents were asked to state their viewpoint towards Item 6 (A student's score on the EEU is a good indication of how well she or he has learned the material), the majority of them (76.7 %) disagreed with this belief. As Table 2 shows, Item 2 (Students' learning is improved by practicing mock exam papers of the EEU) and Item 7 (EEU should NOT be used as the sole criterion for admission into tertiary education) produced the strongest agreement among the surveyed parents. This was followed by items 10 and 4 ('Most of the students work hard to achieve their best in the EEU' and 'EEU forces students to study harder', respectively). This reflected the parents' mixed feelings about the examinations. On the one hand, they did not look at examinations as an accurate reflection of all aspects of their children's study; while, on the other hand, they believed in mock exam papers of the EEU as an important lever for students' learning. The mixed feelings towards the examinations were also demonstrated by the following two items: 'Most of the students dislike the EEU' but 'EEU is one of the motivations for students' learning'.

Table 2. Parents' direct attitudes towards the EEU

Statements	Strongly disagree and disagree		Undecided		Agree and strongly agree	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Most of the students dislike EEU.	7	23.4	6	20.0	17	56.7
Students' learning is improved by practicing mock exam papers of the	0	0.0	3	10.0	27	90.0

EEU.						
Taking EEU is a valuable learning experience.	8	26.7	2	6.7	20	66.6
EEU forces students to study harder.	6	20.0	2	6.7	22	73.3
EEU has an important effect on student self-image.	4	13.3	8	26.7	18	60.0
A student's score on the EEU is a good indication of how well she or he has learned the material.	23	76.7	3	10.0	4	13.3
EEU should NOT be used as the sole criterion for admission into tertiary education.	1	3.3	2	6.7	27	90.0
Students perform better in EEU situation rather than in normal teaching situation.	12	40	3	10.0	15	50.0
Mock examinations are important ways to learn.	1	3.3	9	30.0	20	66.7
Most of the students work hard to achieve their best in the EEU.	6	20.0	1	3.3	23	76.7
EEOU is one of the motivations for students' learning.	7	23.3	6	20	17	56.6

5. Conclusion

The participants' responses showed that the EEU is a competitive exam which directly and negatively affects both the parents and their children. The surveyed parents had a general negative attitude towards the high-stakes exam of the EEU and the majority of them stated that they frequently or always do whatever they can to help their children cope with the EEU. This clearly shows the explicit pressure the EEU puts on the families especially when their children are studying in pre-university level and preparing themselves to sit for the EEU. The main point that the parents need to take note of is that though they like to help their children pass the EEU, they should not remind them of the EEU date as it makes the children stressful. It is recommended that further researches could focus more on the stakeholders of this high-stakes exam to know their perceptions and attitudes towards this test.

6. References

- [1] Alderson, J. C., & Wall, D. (1993). Does washback exist? *Applied Linguistics*, 14, 115-129.
- [2] Andrews, S., Fullilove, J., & Wong, Y. (2002). Targeting washback: A case study. *System*, 30, 207-223.
- [3] Chapman, D. W., & Snyder, C. W. (2000). Can high stakes national testing improve instruction: Reexamining conventional wisdom. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 20, 457-474.
- [4] Cheng, L. (2003). Looking at the impact of a public examination change on secondary classroom teaching: A Hong Kong case study. *Journal of Classroom Interaction* 38 (1), 1-10.

- [5] Cheng, L., & Curtis, A. (2004). Washback or backwash: A review of the impact of testing on teaching and learning. In L. Cheng, Y. Watanabe, & A. Curtis (Eds.), *Washback in language testing: Research contexts and methods* (pp. 3-17). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- [6] Geisinger, K. F. (1994). Cross-cultural normative assessment: Translation and adaptation issues influencing the normative interpretation of assessment instruments, *Psychological Assessment* 6, 304-312.
- [7] Gipps V. C. (1994). *Beyond testing: Towards a theory of educational assessment*. Falmer Press. London.
- [8] Kamyab, S. (2009). Junior colleges in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In (Eds.) *Community College Models*, VI, 561-568. Springer.
- [9] Messick, S. (1996). Validity and washback in language testing. *Language Testing*, 13, 241- 256.
- [10] Wall, D. (1997). Impact and washback in language testing. In C. Clapham & D. Corson (Eds), *Encyclopedia of language and education: Vol. 7. Language testing and assessment* (pp. 291-302). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic