

## **Promoting Positive Washback of the Language Exam with the Assistance of Teachers**

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to show how the impact of high-stakes language exams (washback in testing literature) has been conceptualized in language testing research and to reveal the findings of some selected studies to represent the possible negative and positive washback effects that appear to impact on language teaching and learning. Apart from representing the models of washback research and previous research studies, I also describe certain factors that can facilitate positive washback on teaching and thus learning. This review is not intended to be exhaustive, but merely to illustrate the possible positive washback of the language exam and to make suggestions for improving the quality of teaching methodology and test preparation methodology.

**Keywords.** Language exam, positive washback, language learner, language teacher, teaching methodology

### **Introduction**

High-stakes language exams play a pivotal role in shaping educational decisions about language learning and carry profound consequences, especially in the Hungarian education system, where the state accredited language exam certificate officially attests language knowledge as it means a “passport” to further education and can entail extra scores at the university entrance exam for secondary students (Fekete & Csépes 2018: 13). The language exam has become both a forecaster of the learners’ success and a gauge of teachers’ efficiency. Therefore, the language exam heavily impacts the teachers’ teaching

methodology during learners' preparation for the exam (Bachman & Palmer 1996). Clearly, teachers are expected to mediate the impacts of exams on learners as it is emphasized by Csizér and Öveges (2019), and teachers in Hungary find language exam a potent source of motivation and learning inclination. As teachers' methodologies directly influence learner attitudes towards learning, certain factors may appear during preparation for the exam that strongly influence the way that washback works. Further, as noted by Vidákovich and Vígh (2009) it is important to explore whether the impacts of the tests could potentially pave the way for beneficial innovations in language teaching.

Along these lines, this article has two main foci: to show, based on a review of the literature, what factors can impact the teaching and learning processes during preparation for the exam and to collect strategies that teachers can employ to enhance the positive washback for advantageous rather than detrimental consequences.

### **The Impact of Language Exams: Washback — Models And Theories**

The impacts of language exams are commonly referred to as washback effect in language testing literature, denoting the influence of testing on the curriculum, teaching methodology, and learning behaviours (Alderson & Wall 1993; Hughes 1989; Hughes 2002; Messick 1996). Prior to the early 1990s, the term washback had not been formally defined but was recognized as an attribute of test design, asserting that a well-designed exam exerts a good impact on teaching and vice versa (Heaton 1975, 1990). However, subsequent developments in the field found a more intricate relationship between the test design, teaching and learning, and impressive models of test washback had been created.

In 1993 Alderson and Wall (1993) subjected the term to critical scrutiny and suggested fifteen hypotheses that highlighted certain factors that can affect the functioning of washback. Alderson and Wall (1993) found that the higher the stakes of the exam, the more substantial its influence on learning and teaching, and a test will not only impact the content and methodology of learning and teaching but also the beliefs about learning and teaching.

“A test will influence teaching

A test will influence learning

A test will influence what teachers teach

A test will influence how teachers teach

A test will influence what learners learn

A test will influence how learners learn

A test will influence the rate and sequence of teaching

A test will influence the rate and sequence of learning

A test will influence the degree and depth of teaching

A test will influence the degree and depth of learning

A test will influence attitudes to content, method, etc. of teaching/learning

Tests that have important consequences will have washback

Tests that do not have important consequences will have no washback

Tests will have washback on all learners and teachers” (Alderson & Wall 1993: 120-121).

Based on Alderson and Wall’s (1993) hypotheses Hughes (1994) proposed a distinction among three key elements related to washback impact: the participants (teachers, learners, and curriculum developers), the processes (syllabus, teaching methodology, test-taking strategies) and the products (the acquired knowledge and its quality). According to Hughes (1994), a language exam has the potential to affect all these three impacts. Consequently, he recommended that these elements should be aligned prior to the appearance of washback.

Bailey (1996) combined Alderson and Wall’s (1993) and Hughes’s (1994) theories and created her washback model, in which she elucidated how the participants, the products, and teaching and learning are impacted by high-stakes exams. Additionally, she recommended approaches for assessing washback in alignment with communicative language testing (Hymes 1972; Canale and Swain 1980) to avoid discrepancies between the content and methodologies employed by teachers and activities undertaken by learners in and out of the education context.

Bailey’s (1996) model was followed by Bachman and Palmer’s (1996) theory that established a differentiation between two aspects of test use; macro that has a social impact

and micro that concerns the level of the participants, namely, learners and teachers, the latter of which fall under the purview of this article. Bailey (1996) and Bachman and Palmer (1996) view washback as a multifaceted process as it encompasses not only learning and teaching for the test but also includes the feedback received by learners after taking the exam, and the decisions that are made by the learners and teachers because of exam scores. Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) revisited Alderson and Wall's (1993) influential paper and claimed that the extent and varieties of washback affect teachers and learners differently considering the following aspects:

”status of the test (the level of stakes)”

”extent to which the test is counter to current practice”

”the extent to which teachers and textbook writers think about appropriate methods for test preparation” and

”the extent to which teachers and textbook writers are willing and able to innovate” (p. 296).

In contrast to the perspectives of Bailey (1996), Bachman and Palmer (1996) and Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996), Saif (1999, 2006) highlighted the significance of integrating learners' and teachers' needs and goals into the washback process and emphasized that learners' skills and their motivation should be considered by teachers and test developers. Additionally, in an innovative model, Burrows (2004) demonstrated the important mediating role of teachers as their beliefs, assumptions and knowledge regarding the exam can profoundly influence the ways in which washback will work on learners. Therefore, Burrows (2004) views washback as a proper tool for achieving beneficial changes in teaching and learning. Referring to Saif's (1999, 2006), model on the needs and goals of the learners and teachers (1999, 2006), Bailey's (1996) and Hughes' (1994) models pertaining to the effects of the test on the participants and on the processes as well as Burrows' model (2004) on beliefs and knowledge of teachers, Vigh (2007) defined washback as a multifaceted system in which these elements interact continually and collectively influence the outcomes, and aim to bring about changes in the learning. Additionally, when investigating the washback of the IELTS exam Green (2007) identified three pivotal washback dimensions to gauge whether the exam and the curriculum are

aligned in order to avoid adverse washback that may appear on the teachers' and learners' actions.

### **Washback of the Language Exam on How Learners Learn and How Teachers Teach**

The washback studies have furnished frameworks for studies underscoring the significance of giving careful attention to washback as it serves as a potent connection between testing, learning, and teaching exerting a substantial impact on the way learners learn and teachers teach. The subsequent definition of washback encapsulates its intended meaning as used within the current article: "the extent to which the test influences language teachers and learners to do things that they would not necessarily otherwise do" (Messick 1996: 243).

As previously discussed, a language exam has the capacity to influence the content and ways of learning and teaching and the beliefs about learning and teaching, thus if teachers regard the exam as essential, primarily because of its recognized importance, learners tend to adopt similar viewpoints (Alderson & Wall 1993).

Testing research classifies washback effects, both intended and unintended ones, mediated by teachers as positive and negative (Andrews 1995, 2004; Bachman & Palmer 1996; Qi 2005; Shohamy et al. 1996). Messick (1996) claims that to achieve positive washback the activities involved in learning should not differ too much from the activities applied when preparing for the test. According to Bailey (1996), a test can have a positive washback effect if it helps teachers and learners achieve their educational goals, and a negative one if it impedes the achievement of those goals.

Earlier washback studies were dominantly focused on the negative consequences of language exams, from test anxiety to the emphasized focus on teaching exam strategies. In Shohamy's (1993) synthesis of findings from three language studies, it was observed that "test-like teaching methods" aimed at developing the exam skills and strategies became increasingly prominent as the exam date was approaching. Shohamy (1993) based on classroom observation, also asserted that low-achieving and average-achieving learners experienced harsher test anxiety than their high-achieving peers. According to Alderson and Wall (1993) teaching with a primary focus on the exam led to a narrowed curriculum that emphasized areas included in the exam. Likewise, Lam (1994) uncovered that those parts of the test that yielded the most scores were in the centre of teaching.

Through an investigation of washback concepts, Bailey (1996) claimed that the absence of authentic, life-like learning materials contributes to the reinforcement of negative

washback. Furthermore, Ferman (2004) found that negative washback may result in the loss of motivation in the learner and can cause reduced language learning inclination. Notably, he observed more intense washback in low-achievers, whereas high-achievers were less influenced. If teaching becomes overly fixated on exam-oriented teaching, learners' motivation can be adversely influenced by unwished consequences, which may have repercussions on the learning, communication, and the learning inclination after taking the exam (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011). According to Nikolov (2011) the Hungarian education system, for instance, tends to overemphasize the importance of language exams while disregarding the dynamic nature of language knowledge. Nikolov warns that learners' learning inclination as well as their acquired knowledge may decline after obtaining the certificate, when learners tend to shift their focus to other subjects. This sentiment is further supported by a common phenomenon among language learners and teachers, the language learning plateau, when after reaching a certain education goal the learner might find it challenging to make further progress, which can lead to severe frustration and decline in their enthusiasm towards intense learning (Richards 2008).

Negative washback does not only impact learners, but it also affects teachers, as they play a pivotal role in mediating washback. The findings from some washback studies highlight that teachers often experience negative emotions due to the exam, including stress, frustration, anger, fear and sense of guilt (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons 1996; Shohamy 1993; Brown 2004). Given the Hungarian context, there is a strong emphasis on learners obtaining a language certificate, consequently teachers are expected to prioritize teaching the content and method required for a successful exam rather than having the freedom to teach according to the preferences or specific needs of learners. Despite their ambivalent feelings about methodology, teachers have a strong incentive to follow this approach. The success of their teaching is frequently assessed by the achievements of their learners. Teachers often regard learners' exam results as a recurring ordeal, as the outcomes may be regarded as mirroring the quality and efficiency of their teaching (Nikolov 2011, Shohamy et al. 1996). Further, Märcz's (2018) research findings revealed that those teachers who lacked a proper knowledge of exam strategies and assessment criteria, and had not obtained previous experience as examiners, were experiencing higher anxiety than their more experienced colleagues.

Over the past two decades, however, research has gradually started to view washback as a mediator to foster positive changes in language learning perceived in the form of amplified motivation and autonomous learning as observed by Brown (2004). Read and Hayes (2003) revealed that learners expressed positive attitudes towards the exam and show

high motivation to learn, while Taylor (2005) claimed that positive washback ensues from an exam that stimulates quality teaching and learning practices. Märcz's (2015) investigation into the impact of a Hungary-based state accredited language exam (ECL) on the test-takers' lives found intense inclination to language development among the learners, as well as a positive impact on learners' attitude to language learning and increased motivation and self-confidence in the studied groups. Hsiao et al. (2018) claimed in their study that participants in the exam preparation courses expressed readiness to engage in regular and consistent study and exam preparation. This dedication to intense learning contributed to a heightened and enduring level of motivation.

Similarly to learners, positive washback on teachers was also documented. Watanabe (1996) discerned variations in teaching approaches within the same exam preparation context. While most of the studied teachers were inclined towards test-focused teaching, a few were willing to use creative ideas in the best interest of their learners. For numerous teachers language exams are seen as a means to more effectively assess and identify the specific needs of individual learners (Stecher et al. 2004). Saif (2006) concluded that concentrating on teaching related to the exam led to enhanced learning outcomes. Wang et al. (2014) similarly found positive impacts on teaching when the language teachers were observed to integrate more authentic language teaching materials into lessons not only to prepare learners for the exam but also to enable them to apply the language for communicative purposes in real-life settings. Märcz's (2018) research results similarly suggest that teachers who are motivated and constantly participate in training courses feel more inclined to adopt communicative teaching methods in the interest of their learners. Positive washback on the studied teachers was demonstrated through their increased motivation, lack of anxiety, enhanced self-confidence, and utilization of teaching experiences as feedback. The responses from the teachers interviewed were unanimous in recognizing the significance of the language exam. They all agreed that exams can serve as a tool for making changes in the quality of teaching and boost learners' achievements and motivation.

The review of various washback models and the findings from the empirical studies culminate in the conclusion that washback from a language exam, given its intricate and multi-directional character, significantly affects the learning of students and the methodology employed by teachers. It was also observed that the washback process experienced by learners appeared to be initiated by their individual psychological differences, such as emotions, beliefs and motivation. Supporting the theory set forth by Alderson and Wall (1993) it is

evident that while washback effect on learners and teachers may be heterogeneous, a language exam, particularly one with high stakes, is generally perceived to be important.

However, it is important to note that washback is not constantly present; it can be manifested in diverse forms and intensities, and it may also differ from learner to learner (Cheng 1998; Spratt 2005). The teachers' role has a profound impact and their ability to create positive washback from the exam is perceived through their support in fostering a close and constructive rapport with learners and in developing the methods they use. In their role as mediators of washback, teachers bear the responsibility for creating a supportive learning environment that has the potential to improve efficiency of teaching, increase learners' motivation and their inclination to learning.

### **Promoting Positive Washback of the Language Exam**

Considering the points discussed above it is crucial to underscore the immediate and urgent necessity for enhanced collaboration among teachers and learners. This cooperation is essential to minimize the negative washback impacts of language exams and to promote positive washback. To facilitate effective cooperation between learners and teachers and to improve teaching methodology and test preparation methodology the following measures should be implemented:

#### **1. Cooperation between teachers and learners**

Consistent support and encouragement from teachers can facilitate improved cooperation and assist learners in meeting the evaluation criteria set by the exam as well as reduce test anxiety, stress, frustration, loss of motivation and decreased language learning inclination that are often associated with negative washback. In order to attain this cooperation learners should be encouraged to pose questions to teachers about the scoring process because, as Shohamy (1992) indicated, it should be "detailed, innovative, relevant and diagnostic" (515). Obviously, this requires, on behalf of teachers, active expansion of understanding of scoring report procedures and familiarity with the rating scales and the performance levels required for a successful exam. Also, theories pertaining to diverse aspects of washback should be regularly monitored by the teachers.

#### **2. Feedback from learners**



Teachers' decision-making process on teaching materials and methodology should not be solely driven by exam requirements but should also be influenced by a consideration of what would be more appropriate, interesting, and pleasant for the learners. To achieve that goal, language teachers should consider incorporating authentic, real-life materials in the curriculum, considering the learners' preferences based on their feedback. By analysing the learners' needs and expectations, teachers could rely on learner-centred activities in accord with exam tasks without a completely exam task-oriented language teaching and underestimated authentic language use (Csizér&Öveges 2019). Additionally, teachers should contemplate the factors that foster a learning environment where learners embrace the assessment challenge and feel self-assured because the challenges are tailored to their skills.

### 3. Learners' self-assessment

Not only teachers, but also learners themselves can be appropriate sources of feedback via self-assessment. As practicing self-assessment helps learners become more motivated, more autonomous in learning and more goal-oriented, teachers are advised to present methods of self-assessment around certain exam tasks where criteria are introduced, so learners can see how each criterion is connected to the task (Chen 2008). By that process the teachers may provide possibilities for learners to revise what and how should be improved in the task and in their performance. Learners with proper self-assessment skills tend to develop learner autonomy that empowers them to have a substantial say in shaping what, how and at what rate they should learn. Self-assessment skills and learner autonomy can help them develop their internal criteria for assessing and their individual progress in mastering the language skills, which is closely connected to one of the fifteen hypotheses of Alderson and Wall (1993) on the influence of the extent and depth of the learning process.

### 4. Teaching the use of metacognitive skills

To help learners reach success in learning it is crucial for teachers to teach metacognitive skills such as planning, reasoning and time management to regulate and direct the learning processes. Metacognitive skills applied by learners can enhance the effectiveness of learning and thereby increase learners' confidence and sense of accomplishment. Success in learning can also motivate learners to learn outside the education context and stay inclined to learn.

### 5. Teachers' feedback

Teachers' feedback and expertise should have more impact on the quality and design of the exam that their learners take before and after the exam is being developed, revised, and administered by test-developers. It is of utmost importance that teachers understand the underlying reason and goals behind the language exam. For this purpose, ongoing support from the test developers in terms of the tasks of the exam is needed towards teachers as well as permanent cooperation and consultation between teachers and test developers. Teachers may assist in enhancing the quality of the language exam while test-developers may help teachers in refining their teaching methodology, therefore any modifications stemming from washback effects should be implemented primarily for the benefit of learners, aiming to improve teaching. In order to avoid the negative washback mentioned by Märcz (2018), i.e. high levels of anxiety in teachers who lack experience in examination processes, teachers should be advised to participate in regular exam-specific teacher training courses to gain a solid understanding of exam strategies and criteria assessment.

#### 6. Long-term goals in learning

To avoid the appearance of negative washback effects of test-focused teaching, teachers need to emphasize the importance of maintaining the long-term goals of the language learning process (e.g. developing language knowledge) besides the short-term goals (e.g. receiving good scores at the exam) (Bailey 1996). Learners, when achieving a short-term goal, can maximize their learning efforts and properly adopt particular learning strategies, thus this learning behaviour can be carried toward a long-term learning goal, if the previously mentioned cooperation between learners and teachers and quality teaching occur.

#### 7. Outweighing negative washback effects

Meticulous implementation of the measures detailed above may outweigh negative washback effects and predominantly yield positive impacts on teaching and learning. Regarding negative washback effects, it is crucial for teachers to be mindful of and proactively mitigate any unwarranted anxiety that learners might experience during the exam preparation or the assessment procedure. However, it is important to recognize that a certain level of anxiety is essential to motivate learners to adequately prepare for the exam.

### **Conclusion**

As language learning can be a laborious and monotonous journey it is imperative for learners to cultivate a genuine desire to master the language. Consequently, the commitment and

enthusiasm that learners possibly bring into their language learning endeavour plays a pivotal role in determining their ultimate success. To attain and sustain a positive language learning journey and to achieve success a range of methods are required by teachers to encourage language learners to both ponder and engage actively while keeping up the positive washback of the language exam. Not only language educators but also language learners have constantly advocated intense development in language teaching with a strong emphasis on effectiveness and quality. This commitment extends to fostering innovation and elevating the overall standards of language learning. Language exam preparation practice in Hungary shows that language exams as an intense motivational source in language learning could serve as a potent and enduring instrument for implementing quality teaching methodology within the realm of education. Therefore, it is crucial to mitigate the potential risk factors of negative washback during the language exam preparation process.

Teachers' understanding of patterns of learners response to language exams may give information to them about how to design classroom activities to maximize the number of factors that can facilitate positive washback. As Wall (2005) aptly pointed out, exams may not impact teachers to alter their teaching practices if they are not dedicated to the new thoughts and if they lack the skills that will allow them to adjust to revised and improved methodology. All such incremental knowledge and innovative ideas increase teachers' capacity to explore and assess the types of teaching and test preparation methods that can generate the most fulfilling and suitable learning experience for learners and induce positive washback effects. A good language exam is not an assurance of positive washback effect, and conversely a bad language exam does not inherently yield negative washback. It is the teacher who wields the greatest influence in determining whether the washback on learning and teaching will be negative or positive.

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