



Washback Effect of IELTS on Iranian Learners' Perspectives on IELTS Preparation Courses

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate the washback effect of IELTS on learners' perspectives and expectations of IELTS preparation courses in Iran. Thirty Iranian learners (20 IELTS students and 10 non-IELTS students) were randomly selected and asked to fill in a questionnaire concerning their expectations of a desired IELTS writing course. Then, the total scores of the groups were compared. The results of the study revealed the negative washback of IELTS on the learners' perspectives toward the relevant courses and make them develop some expectations regarding teaching method, materials taught, course design, etc. The findings also indicated no difference between the two groups in terms of perspectives of the courses.

Keywords: Expectations, high-stakes test, IELTS, washback

INTRODUCTION

Testing, as an integral part of teaching process, is a tool of collecting data about learners' progress and achievement during or at the end of a course. The number of standardized high-stakes tests employed in educational contexts whose results are used to make important decisions for the selection and placement of students around the world is steadily increasing (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Wall, 1998). Such tests and the results obtain from them affect learners, teachers, and other stakeholders (Madaus, 1988). As Bersoff (1996) argues, "testing is the primary means by which the major decision about people lives are made in industry, education, the military, hospital, and mental health clinic" (p. 1).

As the literature of the subject indicates, there is a reciprocal relation between testing and learning process. Therefore, having a well-known perspective of *washback effect*, i.e., the effect of testing on teaching and learning process (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007) will be

a worthwhile area for further search. In the recent years, the number of studies on washback effect in language testing has been growing rapidly due to its critical impact on learning, learners and teachers, and even the society or the complete educational system of a country (Özmen, 2011). In many contexts, the results of high-stakes tests are the only criteria determining whether the candidates get into the programs they desire (Yildirim, 2010). Hence, it is not surprising that research on high-stakes tests consistently shows that they have a great impact on the teaching paradigms and educational systems in various countries (Shohamy, 2001) and lead the scholars to focus on their consequences on students, teachers, and relevant institutions (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Messick, 1996; Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt & Ferman, 1996; Taylor, 2005; Yıldırım, 2010). If a test is considered as important, then "preparation for it can come to dominate all teaching and learning activities" (Hughes 1989, p. 1).

In the recent years, by changing in the economic status, culture, and life style, the number of Iranians who choose to live, work, or study abroad has been constantly increasing. As a result, the outcomes of IELTS, as an international high-stakes test accepted by many professional and educational institutes and professional organizations all around the world, is supposed to exert considerable influences on the relevant educational programs. Such an impact is supposed to lead to changes in teaching methods employed by the teachers (Spratt, 2005; Wall, 2005), to alternation of course objectives (Cheng, Watanabe & Curtis, 2004) as well as to changes in individual learning styles (Shih, 2009). Also, it may change the learners' perspectives toward the relevant courses and make them develop some expectations regarding teaching method, materials taught, course design and objectives, or other aspects of courses, especially in educational context of Iran which is highly test-oriented. Since there is little empirical research examining washback effect of IELTS, as an important high-stake exam in Iran, from the learners' point of view, it has been selected as the focus of the present study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What Is Washback?

The research conducted in the field of language acquisition and teaching indicates that both testing and teaching are so closely interrelated (Buck, 1998) that working in one is almost impossible without being constantly concerned with the other (Heaton, 1988). As Stobart (2003) argues, testing is not a neutral process and always has consequences on the teaching and learning. Since the results of testing are influential in making distinction between the learners, "for everyone who advances there will be some who stay behind" (Wall, 2000, p. 500).

According to Davies (1995), washback effect is defined as the basic idea that the nature and the content of the test shape the choices of the learners from the curricular content and learning strategies. Messick (1996) also defines it as any teaching and learning actions taken in a learning context as a result of the nature and content of the test. Washback is rooted in the notion that tests or examinations can and should drive teaching, and hence learning, and is also referred to as measurement-driven instruction (Popham, 1987). The concept of washback is closely associated with validity affecting the

quality relationship between testing, teaching, and learning (Cheng, 2000). In Messick's (1996) terms, washback is "a part of construct validity and an inherent quality of any kind of assessment, especially when the results are used for important decisions". Also, Salehi and Yunus (2011) argue that only valid tests which minimize construct irrelevancies can increase the possibility of positive washback".

Washback is a neutral term which may refer to positive, intended, or beneficial effects or to harmful, negative, or unintended effects (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Buck, 1988; Hughes, 2003). Djuric (2008) posits that if teachers narrow any aspect of the curriculum because of the tests, it results in negative washback. Positive washback, on the other hand, is said to result when a testing procedure encourages good teaching practice (Tylor, 2005). Washback should be differentiated from *test impact*. Test impact possibly happens at a *macro* level, e.g., in a social or an institutional context while washback can be observed solely at the *micro* level of the individuals, i.e., mostly teachers and students (Hamp-Lyons, 1997; McNamara, 1996). In other words, impact is defined as the effect of a test on "individuals, policies, or practices within the classroom" (Cheng & Curtis, 2004, p. 4). Some, however, believe that both narrow and wider effects can be categorized under the term washback (Fullilove & Wong, 2002, as cited in Salehi & Yunus, 2011).

IELTS and Learners' Expectations

International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is a high-stake test widely designated by many universities, educational institutes, and organizations all around the world to assess language ability of applicants of studying or working through the medium of English. Since the result obtained from IELTS may have serious implications for the life chances of test takers, it is supposed to exert a strong influence on teachers and learners' behavior (Green, 2006). The present study was an attempt to investigate the interaction between teaching methods and course contents of IELTS preparation courses and Iranian IELTS students' expectations of the courses, as well as to compare such expectations to those of non-IELTS learners.

Green (2006) investigated the washback effect of IELTS on 108 Chinese learners' attitudes toward IELTS academic writing preparation courses and also compared it to those of non-IELTS EAP learners through a questionnaire. The questionnaire also was given to 39 IELTS and non- IELTS teachers and their responses weighted against those of learners. The results revealed that the learners' perceptions of the course outcomes were affected by the course focus reported by the teachers, but that the relationship was not deterministic.

Green (2007) investigated the effect of dedicated test preparation classes on improving EFL learners' writing test scores. Sixty learners were selected and assigned to pre-session EAP courses with/without IELTS preparation strands and IELTS preparation courses lasting for 4 to 14 weeks. All participants took IELTS writing tests. Moreover, the learners' individual characteristics, beliefs, and attitudes considered likely to mediate washback were assessed through questionnaires and course documentation. The results indicated that learners participating in the courses including IELTS preparation did not improve their scores to any greater extent than those participating in pre-session EAP

courses with or without an IELTS preparation component. Furthermore, no significant correlation was found between the scores gained and the results of the questionnaire.

Rahimi and Nazhand (2010) examined the effect of washback on speaking skill development through administering questionnaires relating to the speaking instruction to the learners preparing for general IELTS exam, studying via IELTS e-learning courses and non-IELTS e-learning courses. The same questionnaire are given to learners at course entry and at course exit and the results are compared between courses. The results revealed that learners' expectations and perceptions of course outcomes are affected by the course focus significantly.

Allen (2016) investigated the washback effect of IELTS through studying test preparation strategies employed by 300 first-year undergraduate Japanese students and also its effect on the learners' scores on the four skills. The participants took two versions of IELTS test and completed a survey. The survey targeted three main aspects including preparation for four skills, types of activity (based on the tasks in IELTS test), focus on form, fluency, and test taking techniques. The survey was repeated for the first and the second tests and the results were compared. The findings revealed that IELTS generated positive washback on the learners' productive skills. Also, the learners were found to tend to focus on test-related tasks and materials.

By reviewing the literature on the subject, it is revealed that research on washback effect has mostly targeted its effect on teaching practices and materials (Green, 2006, 2007; Mickan & Motteram, 2008). Yet, investigating the issue from the learners' perspectives seems to need more attention by the researchers on the field. Regarding the increasing importance of succeeding in IELTS exam for Iranian learners and its determining effect on their educational and professional opportunities, the present study aimed to investigate the washback effect of IELTS in the context of Iran by attempting to answer the following research questions:

- What is the washback effect of IELTS on learners' perspectives of the preparation courses?
- Is there a difference between the IELTS learners' expectations from English courses and non-IELTS learners'?

METHOD

Participants

The participants of the study were 30 learners. Twenty of them were studying IELTS and ten of them were supposed to start IELTS after one or two terms and they were considered as non-IELTS group. There were 11 male and 19 female participants, and their ages ranged from 17 to 38 with a mean of 27.8 years. The participants received the questionnaire and completed it in person, in the classroom.

Instruments

This study utilized a 24-item questionnaire which aimed to find out what would students want to study during IELTS courses and what would they expect to learn. It was adapted

from a study by Green (2006). Items accompanied by a five-point Likert scale attached to descriptors ranging from 1=*definitely disagree* to 2= *definitely agree*.

Data Analysis and Procedures

This was a quantitative study which employed a questionnaire to collect the data. The questionnaire distributed among students in form of hard copy and they were asked to read the sentences and determine the extent to which they agree with them. The data analysis utilized was the Statistical Package Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23. The data gathered from the participants were analyzed using the descriptive statistics in order to collect the frequency count and percentages. They were presented in the form of tables. A Mann-Whitney U Test was also run to investigate any possible difference between the groups.

Result

The internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire was calculated and represented in Table 1. As shown, the value of Cronbach's alpha coefficient obtained showed a high level of reliability, $\alpha = .82$.

Table 1. The Internal Consistency Reliability of the Questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.82	24

Table 2, represents the descriptive statistics of the questionnaire including means and standard deviations of the items for the IELTS and non-IELTS groups. As the means of the items (*Min* = 3.00 and *Max* = 4.60) revealed, the learners' responses mostly lie between "neutral" to "definitely agree".

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics by Items

	IELTS group			Non-IELTS group		
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Q1	20	3.90	.78	10	4.00	.66
Q2	20	3.95	1.05	10	4.40	.84
Q3	20	3.80	.89	10	3.40	.51
Q4	20	3.65	1.13	10	3.00	1.05
Q5	20	4.05	.94	10	4.60	.51
Q6	20	4.25	.85	10	3.50	1.26
Q7	20	4.05	.94	10	3.50	.70
Q8	20	4.20	.89	10	3.80	.63
Q9	20	4.05	1.23	10	4.10	.87
Q10	20	4.35	.67	10	3.90	.56
Q11	20	3.95	1.05	10	3.90	.87
Q12	20	3.95	.68	10	3.70	.67

Q13	20	3.90	.78	10	3.50	.70
Q14	20	4.15	.93	10	3.80	.63
Q15	20	4.05	1.09	10	3.80	.78
Q16	20	3.90	1.16	10	3.00	.66
Q17	20	4.20	1.00	10	4.00	.66
Q18	20	3.65	1.08	10	3.90	.87
Q19	20	4.25	.85	10	4.30	.82
Q20	20	4.20	.95	10	4.10	.87
Q21	20	4.05	1.23	10	3.80	1.31
Q22	20	4.20	1.00	10	3.30	.67
Q23	20	3.95	1.05	10	3.30	.48
Q24	20	4.15	1.04	10	3.60	.69

Table 3 represents the descriptive statistics for the learners' total scores. As shown, the mean scores of the IELTS and non-IELTS groups were 96.80 ($SD = 11.06$) and 90.20 ($SD = 6.40$), respectively. This indicated a difference between the groups' expectations.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics by Groups

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
IELTS	20	96.80	11.06
non-IELTS	10	90.20	6.40
Total	30	94.60	10.14

A Mann-Whitney U test was run to investigate any difference between the groups. As represented in Table 4, no statistically significant difference was found between the IELTS and non-IELTS groups in terms of course expectations, $U = 60.50$, $p = .08$. This indicated that Iranian EFL learners has the same expectations of the courses regardless of the test type and importance.

Table 4. Mann-Whitney U Test

	Total scores
Mann-Whitney U	60.50
Wilcoxon W	115.50
Z	-1.74
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.08
Exact Sig. [2*(1-tailed Sig.)]	.08

DISCUSSION

The first question of the study was regarding the washback effect of IELTS on the students' expectations of the IELTS preparation courses in Iran. As the results of the questionnaire revealed, IELTS learners generally reported that they expected the IELTS preparation courses to be near to the standards of IELTS exam in such a way that they could practice test-like tasks and activities helping them acquire the needed skills for

succeeding in the exam. Such finding may imply that IELTS had generally negative washback effect on the teaching and learning process since, according to the learners' responses to the questionnaire, it is supposed to restrict the of focus of the courses to test-related tasks and activities. Such a finding is in line with the finding of the previous research (Green, 2006, 2007; Rahimi & Nazhand, 2010). On the other hand, in line with the findings by Allen (2016), IELTS seemed to exert positive impact in some way. As the learners' responses revealed, IELTS seemed to encourage the learners to broaden their general knowledge of vocabulary and writing styles and, in Tylor's (2005) words, good teaching and learning practice.

Regarding the second research question of the study, the finding showed that there was no significant difference between the course expectations of IELTS group and those of non-IELTS group. Despite different course contents and objectives, it seems that both groups had the same expectations from the different writing courses. Such a finding may be obtained due to the test-oriented nature of learning in Iranian educational contexts. Even though teaching and learning paradigms, methods, and designs of second language learning has been considerably changed during the latest decades in Iran, it is learners' outcomes of tests and examinations, not the process of learning by itself, which are still regarded as criterion of success or failure of a program in different educational levels and contexts. Therefore, it is not surprising that the washback effect of low-stakes tests on learners' perspectives and expectations is as great as high-stakes tests. Nevertheless, more empirical evidence is needed to prove such a claim. Another possible explanation for this finding may lie in the inefficient learning foreign language programs in Iranian schools. To compensate such deficiency, learners have to spend a great deal of time and cost in private institutes. So, it is not surprising that they develop high expectations of the relevant courses, regardless of importance and scope of tests.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the washback effect of IELTS on Iranian IELTS learners' expectations of the IELTS writing preparation courses in Iran. It also compered the expectations of IELTS and non-IELTS learners regarding course contents, learning priorities, and teaching methods. The result revealed a negative washback for IELTS. Moreover, no difference was found between the two groups in terms of their expectations of the course. The finding of the present study should be treated cautiously due to the small sample size. Another limitation was that this study only targeted students' perspectives of IELTS preparation courses. It is suggested that future studies examine the previous findings based on students' outcomes. Moreover, it will be helpful to study the issue from teachers' perspective. Finally, focusing on learners' individual characteristics such as age groups, educational background, learning styles, etc., as well as different contexts may result in different findings.

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