

***The Washback Impact of the Iranian University
Entrance Examination on Pre-University
English Teachers***

Mohammad Reza Ghorbani

Universiti Putra Malaysia

Arshad Abd. Samad

Universiti Putra Malaysia

Mohd Sahandri Gani Hamzah

Universiti Putra Malaysia

Nooreen Noordin

Universiti Putra Malaysia

This study examines the nature and scope of the washback impact of the university entrance examination (UEE) on pre-university English teachers' (PETs) perceptions. Teaching experience, educational background, professionalism, and gender were studied as independent variables.

Based on stratified random sampling, 377 PETs were selected to respond to the questionnaires. Eight PETs were also purposively selected to participate in two focus group interviews. Pearson product moment and t-test were used to analyze the quantitative data from the survey questionnaires and a systematic note-based technique recommended by Kruger (2002) was used to analyze the qualitative data from the focus group interviews.

The findings show that only PETs' perceived professionalism in teaching was associated with their perceptions ($r = .38$). All of the

interviewed PETs perceived the negative effect of the UEE and expected the authorities to reform it based on the current teaching and testing theories.

Key words: Washback, University Entrance Examination, and English Teaching

BACKGROUND

According to Ostovar Namaghi (2006), three forces steer teachers' work in the Iranian educational context. First, since teachers cannot choose a textbook which is in line with their students' needs, the input is controlled by the prescribed curriculum. Second, the output is controlled by the mandated national testing scheme so that teachers cannot develop tests which have a positive backwash on teaching and learning. Third, since high score is culturally equal to higher achievement, the process of teaching and learning is controlled by the grade pressure from students, parents and school principals. He argues that teachers are pure implementer of the prescribed initiatives and schemes surrounded by cultural constraints which prevent them from using their own professional knowledge and experience.

Since the UEE influences students' future career and lives, PETs often teach to the test and students focus only on those activities and skills that are likely to appear on the test. The effect of testing on teaching and learning has been known as washback in literature.

Gates (1995) refers to washback "as the influence of testing on teaching and learning" (p. 101). Messick (1996) defines washback as "the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning" (p. 241). Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt and Ferman (1996) define washback as "the connections between testing and learning" (p. 298). "The washback effect clearly has to do with the effect of external testing on

the teaching and learning processes in language classrooms” (Brown, 2000, p. 5). In this study, washback is narrowly defined as the impact of the UEE on PETs’ instruction and curriculum planning in three dimensions: classroom syllabi, teaching contents, and teaching methods.

Literature has indicated that testing washback is a complex, elusive, and multi-dimensional concept (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Chen, 2002a, 2002b; Cheng, 2000; Cheng, 2005; Spratt, 2005). The following quotation from Spratt (2005, p. 21) indicates that washback is not just the result of tests. He argued:

These studies indicate that rather than there being a direct, automatic and blanket effect of exams, washback is more complex and elusive. It seems to be a phenomenon that does not exist automatically in its own right but is rather one that can be brought into existence through the agency of teachers, students or others involved in the test-taking process.

Some studies conclude that no washback effect occurs (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Watanabe, 1996b), while others find different types of washback effect on classroom instruction, teaching materials, scope and sequence curricular planning, and time arrangement (Herman & Golan, 1991; Hughes, 1988). Alderson and Wall in their 1993 article, which put forward various hypotheses on washback, called for more empirical research on it: “Clearly, more research is needed in this area” (p. 127). More research studies should be undertaken to examine washback qualitatively and quantitatively (Chen, 2002a; Cheng, 2005).

To what extent the UEE affects the PETs’ teaching and curriculum planning is open to debate. Drawing on the previous findings, this study was an attempt to begin to address this shortcoming in research on the Iranian UEE. It was also designed to examine the nature and scope of the UEE impact on pre-university English teaching in order to provide information to the involved authorities at the decision making, intervening, and implementing levels in Iranian educational system.

RESEARCH CONTEXT

On the whole, the Iranian educational system consists of :

- 1) five year primary school from the age of six (compulsory education),
- 2) three year junior high school from the age of 11 (compulsory education),
- 3) three year senior high school from the age of 14,
- 4) one year pre-university education from the age of 17 to 18, and
- 5) university which is under the supervision of the Ministry of Medical Health (MMH) and the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT).

A big problem in the Iranian Educational system is that admission to university is extremely competitive and difficult. Although the government has increased and expanded higher education institutions, it has not yet been able to meet the needs of a large number of applicants who are eager to enter free of charge public universities and institutes. That is why admission to higher education institutions is done through a tough nation-wide entrance examination in which only the most talented and studious students can manage.

English is taught as a foreign language and is practiced within a context-restricted environment, in which the textbook and classroom teacher play the main role. Previously, English education in Iran formally started from second grade in junior high schools, but now it begins from the first grade.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In the literature, the effect of testing on teaching and learning is commonly referred to as washback. Some research has already been done about this phenomenon based on which the following conceptual framework was established.

Wall and Alderson (1993) created the washback hypothesis, and since then some studies have been done on it (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Chen,

2002a, 2002b; Cheng, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005; Hamp-Lyons, 1997; Spratt, 2005). The washback hypothesis is a subdivision of the impact theory which tries to study the relationship between a test and the society in which it is used (Wall, 1996, 1998).

Innovation theory (Henrichsen, 1989) from which the conceptual framework for the impact studies began and washback theory (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Alderson & Wall, 1993; Hamp-Lyons, 1999) propose that test-related effects may occur at different points in time, even before a new formal test is introduced.

Washback theory was developed into 15 hypotheses by Alderson and Wall (1993) as delineated below. Except for those which are related to the learners and learning, the rest (Hypotheses 1, 3, 4, 7, 9, 11, 12, and 15) were explicitly or implicitly addressed in this study in order to understand the perceived washback effect of the UEE on Iranian PETs' instruction and curriculum planning.

1. A test will influence teaching.
2. A test will influence learning.
3. A test will influence what teachers teach.
4. A test will influence how teachers teach.
5. A test will influence what learners learn.
6. A test will influence how learners learn.
7. A test will influence the rate and sequence of teaching.
8. A test will influence the rate and sequence of learning.
9. A test will influence the degree and depth of teaching.
10. A test will influence the degree and depth of learning.
11. A test will influence attitudes towards the content, method, etc. of teaching and learning.
12. Tests that have important consequences will have washback.
13. Tests that do not have important consequences will have no washback.
14. Tests will have washback on all learners and teachers.
15. Tests will have washback effects for some learners and some teachers, but not

for others.

A washback study by Cheng (2005) indicates that while testing may influence teachers' decisions about what to teach, it does not necessarily influence how to teach. Chen (2002b) investigated how English teachers in Taiwan junior high schools perceived the impact of a reformed public examination, called the Basic Competency Test. Findings from Chen's study indicated that the Basic Competency Test had an influential impact on teachers' curricular planning and instruction. Chen argued that such a washback effect was quite artificial; it affected the teachers' teaching content but not their teaching method.

Watanabe (1996a, 1996b) reported that the Japanese university entrance exams affected some teachers but not others. His findings indicated that the classroom teaching methodology is also affected by other factors such as teachers' educational background, their teaching experience, and their personal beliefs. Spratt (2005, p. 12) also argued that:

There has been a perception that washback affects teaching content but not teaching methods. This perception is not fully supported It seems to be true in some circumstances but not others, suggesting that whether the exam affects methods or not may also depend on factors other than the exam itself, such as the individual teacher.

Factors Affecting Teachers' Perceptions of Mandated Tests

Based on the findings from recent studies on the washback phenomenon, tests by themselves will have little impact on teaching. There are other factors associated with washback impact which may lead to different results from context to context (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Chen, 2002a, 2002b; Cheng, 2005; Shohamy et al., 1996; Wall & Alderson, 1993). In this study, the following four teacher-related factors which are assumed to be closely associated with the UEE washback effect were studied.

Teaching Experience

Shohamy et al. (1996) found that experienced teachers in comparison to novice teachers were not only more sensitive to public examinations but also more likely to teach to the test. A number of other studies (e.g., Cheng, 1997; Watanabe, 1996a, 1996b) have indicated that teachers' teaching experience is an important factor which affects teachers' perceptions of the washback effect.

Cimbricz (2002) found that teachers' interpretations of state testing were influenced not only by state testing itself, but also by the teachers' beliefs, knowledge, and experience. However, Chen's washback studies in Taiwan (2002a, 2002b) reveal that teachers' teaching experience had a negligible relationship with their perceptions of the impact of the public examination.

In this study, teachers' experience ranged from zero to thirty years, so the scale of measurement for teaching experience was assumed to be ratio. All of the related items were measured on a six-point continuum Likert-type scale.

Education Background

Educational background is another teacher related factor that is usually associated with washback impact. Both of the studies carried out by Watanabe (1996a, 1996b) indicated that teachers' perceptions of the impact of test washback on their teaching could be, to some extent, due to their educational backgrounds. In terms of how exam preparation courses were actually taught, Watanabe concluded that "teacher factors may outweigh the influence of an examination" (1996a, p. 331). Chen (2002a, 2002b) found that teachers with a higher degree perceived the impact of the Taiwanese public examination more than those who had a lower degree.

In this study, the scale of measurement for educational background was assumed to be nominal.

Professionalism in Teaching

In general, tests at the provincial or national level seem to affect teachers

in Iran since their reputation is usually strengthened or weakened by the test results. This is assumed to have led to their apprehension and thus negative washback impact in the classroom. The high-stakes UEE which is so valuable and useful to the decision makers is not necessarily fruitful to English teachers and language education.

Madaus (1988) asserts that teachers will focus more on the skills which appear in the test when their professional value is judged based on their students' success in the exam. While criticizing measurement-driven instruction which was advocated by Popham (1987), he claims that it "constrains the creativity and spontaneity of teachers and students and finally demeans the professional judgment of teachers" (p. 95).

Khaniya (1990) states that "A large number of teachers help students cope with the examinations in order to preserve their reputation as good teachers" (p. 51). Richards and others (1992) points out that teachers' performance may be assessed based on their students' performance in public examinations, not on the quality of their teaching.

Furthermore, Alderson and Wall (1993) found that teachers' fear of their students' weak performance in public exams would possibly lead them to teaching towards the test. If teachers' success is evaluated by their students' successful performance on a test which affects their future career and lives, they will attempt to teach towards the test due to the strong washback effect that the test exerts in such a situation (Vallette, 1994). Chen's (2002a, 2002b) findings showed that teachers' perceived professionalism in teaching was positively and moderately associated with their perceptions of the impact of the public examination in Taiwan. Cheng (2005) points out that "in high-stakes environments, in which the results of mandated tests trigger rewards, sanctions, or public scrutiny and loss of professional status, teachers will be motivated to pursue the objectives that the test embodies" (p. 36).

In this study, the scale of measurement for professionalism in teaching was assumed to be interval. All of the related items were measured on a six-point continuum Likert-type scale.

Gender

In the Iranian educational context a segregated school system is in operation, so gender may be an important factor which is usually associated with teachers' different perceptions of the washback impact of nationwide exams. The male and female school contexts are different. Male and female teachers have different reactions to the UEE washback. Although Chen's (2002a) findings indicated that there was a negligible relationship between teachers' gender and their perceptions of the washback impact of the Taiwanese basic competence test on their teaching, the results may be different from context to context.

In this study, the scale of measurement for gender was assumed to be nominal.

Objectives of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate and determine:

1. PETs' perceptions of the impact of the UEE on their curricular planning and instruction in three dimensions: 1) syllabus design, 2) methods of teaching, 3) teaching contents (the dependent variable).
2. The effect of teacher-related independent variables (teaching experience, educational background, gender, and perceived professionalism in teaching) on the dependent variable.

Research Hypotheses

Based on the objectives of this study, the following research hypotheses are established to facilitate the investigation regarding the impact of the UEE on Iranian PETs' curricular planning and instruction.

- H₀ 1. There is no significant relationship between teachers' teaching experience and their perceptions of the impact of the UEE on their curricular planning and instruction.

H₀ 2. There is no significant difference between teachers' educational backgrounds regarding their perceptions of the impact of the UEE on their curricular planning and instruction.

H₀ 3. There is no significant relationship between professionalism in teaching and the teachers' perceptions of the impact of the UEE on their curricular planning and instruction.

H₀ 4. There is no difference between teachers' genders regarding their perceptions of the impact of the UEE on their curricular planning and instruction.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The sequential exploratory mixed methods design was used in this study. According to Creswell (2005, p. 515), in this design the researcher:

1. Places a priority on quantitative data collection and analysis.
2. Collects quantitative data first in the sequence.
3. Uses the qualitative data to refine the results from the quantitative data.

Survey Questionnaire

Based on the consideration of statistical power (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970), the appropriate sample size for this study was 375 subjects. Stratified random sampling was used to select girls and boys' pre-university centers. Then, the questionnaires were sent to all of the randomly selected centers for the English teachers who were teaching in the north east of Iran.

Three dimensions related to PETs' perceptions including 1) classroom syllabi, 2) teaching contents, and 3) teaching methods were measured and assessed to analyze and interpret the degree of their perceptions of the impact of the UEE on their curricular planning and instruction. Teacher-related

independent variables comprised 1) teaching experience, 2) educational background, 3) teachers' perceived professionalism in teaching, and 4) gender.

Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews

Eight purposively selected PETs participated in 2 focus group interviews to discuss the questions raised on the focus group interview guide. The researcher was the moderator who had the whole discussion process under control. An assistant moderator who was an EFL lecturer with a background in research was selected to help the researcher.

Based on the recommendations and suggestions from Krueger (2002), the assistant moderator was responsible to:

1. Help with equipment & refreshments,
2. Arrange the room,
3. Welcome participants as they arrive,
4. Sit in designated location,
5. Take notes throughout the discussion,
6. Operate recording equipment,
7. Refrain from participating in the discussion,
8. Ask questions when invited,
9. Give an oral summary,
10. Debrief with moderator,
11. Give feedback on analysis and reports.

In this study, two groups were interviewed. Each of the two groups consisted of four participants. Three of them had a BA degree and one had an MA degree. Each group included two male and two female teachers.

Instrumentation

As pointed out by Bailey (1999), no single uniform questionnaire has been

emerged to be used in different contexts. A survey questionnaire which had already been developed by Chen (2002a) was modified and used by the researcher to gain a general picture of the PETs' perceptions of the impact of the UEE on their curricular planning and instruction. In addition, a semi-structured focus group interview topic guide which also had already been developed by Chen (2002a) was modified and used by the researcher to obtain in-depth and detailed information about PETs' perceptions.

A panel of experts reviewed and assessed the instruments three times to determine their content and face validity. For the field test, five Iranian PETs reviewed the items. They helped the researcher to clarify the items and improve the overall instrument quality.

For the pilot test, thirty PETs responded to the items and helped the researcher establish the reliability of the first three parts of the survey questionnaire. The internal consistency reliability coefficient for the items in the first three parts of the survey questionnaire was 0.97.

Regarding the semi-structured focus group interviews, two PETs, both doctoral candidates in the area of language education, helped the researcher pilot the focus group interview guide to ensure its appropriacy and clarity.

Data Collection Procedures

After the sampling procedures were finalized, data collection was carried out in two phases.

Mailed Survey Questionnaire

In this study, mailed survey questionnaire was used from May to July 2007 as one of the methods of data collection. The data collection procedures recommended by Dillman (1978) and modified by Chen (2002a, p. 64) were used with some minor modifications as follows:

- A) A phone call was made to the principals of the randomly selected pre-university

schools informing them of the forthcoming questionnaires.

- B) A week later, the survey questionnaire packets were sent to the principals. The packets included: 1) questionnaires, 2) pre-addressed, stamped return envelope 3) letter to the principal to explain how to help with the data collection, and 4) cover letter to the teacher. The letter covered a) the purpose of the study and its social utility, b) professional institution under its jurisdiction the research is conducted, c) the importance of the respondent's honest answer, d) promise of confidentiality and explanation of identification, e) the discussion of code number on the questionnaire, f) the researcher's e-mail, g) an appreciation for teacher's participation, and h) deadline date.
- C) A week later after the deadline to return the questionnaire, the first follow-up was conducted to remind the principals who had not returned the questionnaires.
- D) Another week after the first follow-up, phone call reminders were given to the principals who had not returned the questionnaires.
- E) Double-dip (Dillman, 1978) was used to control non-response error. Fifteen percent of non-respondents were randomly selected and interviewed either personally or by telephone to get their responses. The responses from the respondents and non-respondents were statistically compared to each other. The double-dip technique was used to make a correct decision. Based on the t-test results since there was no significant difference between the response and non-response groups, the non-response error was collapsed. However, if responses had been different, the following proportionately weighted formula would have been calculated to adjust the data.

$$\text{Adjusted mean} = \frac{n \times \text{respondents' mean} + m \times \text{non-respondents' mean}}{n + m}$$

n = the respondents' population size m = non-respondents' population size

On the whole, 377 questionnaires were sent to the randomly selected sample but only 192 questionnaires were returned, with a response rate of 51%. Out of the 185 non-respondents, 28 teachers (15%) were randomly selected and interviewed either personally or by telephone to get their responses.

Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews

The following suggestions and recommendations which were made by Krueger (1994, 2002), Chen (2002a), Ary and others (2002), and Creswell (2005) were followed to gather data through the interviews in August 2007.

1. A quiet, suitable place was located for conducting the interview.
2. Consent was obtained from all of the purposively selected teachers before they are interviewed.
3. A focus group discussion guide had already been developed.
4. The moderator took keynotes and the assistant moderator noted the details during the discussion.
5. The interviews were tape recorded to facilitate the data transcription.
6. The participants were thanked in a courteous manner after concluding the interview.

DATA ANALYSIS

Procedures for data analysis in this study consisted of (a) analyzing the quantitative data collected from the survey questionnaire and (b) analyzing and interpreting the qualitative data obtained from the focus group interviews based on a systemic note-based technique suggested by Krueger (2002).

Mailed Survey Questionnaire

SPSS was used to analyze the quantitative data from the survey questionnaires. Descriptive statistics helped the researcher to describe the basic features of the data and present quantitative descriptions in a manageable form. After organizing and summarizing the collected data in a sensible way, *t*-test and Pearson product moment correlation were then applied to analyze them.

Non-Response Error Control

As indicated in Table 1, since the results did not indicate any significant difference between the means of the two groups, the proportionately weighted formula was not applied to adjust the data. The non-response error was collapsed which means the data of non-response group were representative of the sample. So the results were assumed to be valid for the population.

TABLE 1
Comparison of the Response Group and Non-response Group Means

Group	N	Mean	Std Dev	df	t	Sig.
Response	177	232.5198	17.98424	203	.917	.360
Non-response	28	229.2143	15.97534			

Semi-Structured Focus Group Interviews

There are a number of approaches to the analysis of qualitative data. The present study used Krueger's (2002) systemic and note-based content analysis process with some minor modifications (See Appendix A). All the eight interviewed PETs were purposefully selected from Iranian pre-university centers in the north east of the country (See Appendix B).

Generally speaking, PETs threw blame on obstacles and constraints outside themselves in their interviews. A conflict between the thrust of communicative approach which values spoken fluency and communication and the UEE which assesses accuracy in reading alone was iterated by PETs as one of the main factors that restricted their latitude.

In fact, PETs perceived they were in the middle of a tug of war in which the need for a more communicative teaching approach, on the one hand, and the current traditional UEE, on the other hand, pulled at opposite ends. They felt that the UEE system was not in synchrony with the current advocated teaching approach and reported that this mismatch would always impede innovation in the instruction and curriculum planning process. Table 2 presents the six factors and themes which the interviewed PETs mentioned in

their interview.

TABLE 2
Factors Influencing PETs' Curricular Planning and Instruction (n = 8)

Factors	Frequency
University Entrance Exam	8
Final Term Exam	7
Textbook	6
Time Constraint	5
Teacher Evaluation Policy	3
Language Learning Facilities	1

Based on the eight interviewed PETs' remarks, the main impact of the UEE on their curricular planning and instruction was in the following areas as indicated in Table 3.

TABLE 3
Impact of the UEE on PETs' Curricular Planning and Instruction

Impact	Frequency
Teaching to the Test	8
The Use of Exam-Related Books	5
The Use of Sample Exams	5
Assessment	3
Teaching Content	2
Syllabus Design	1

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Data

The first part of the questionnaire (impact of the UEE on teachers' curricular planning and instruction) included the following three dimensions:

1. Teaching methods
2. Syllabus design
3. Teaching contents

Table 4 indicates the mean and standard deviation of the PETs' perception of the UEE washback effect on their curricular planning and instruction in the three related dimensions.

TABLE 4
The Level of PETs' Perceptions of the UEE Washback Impact (N=220)

Dimensions of Teachers' Perception	Mean out of 6	St Dev
1. Teaching methods	3.8964	.53939
2. Syllabus design	3.9828	.53169
3. Teaching contents	3.8327	.36761

Out of 377 questionnaires which were sent to the randomly selected sample, only 192 questionnaires were returned, with a response rate of 51 percent. Out of the 192 teachers who responded to the questionnaires, some of them did not respond to some items.

Based on the data in the demographic section, most of the PETs were teaching in urban (61.4%) and public (84.1%) schools. The proportion of male to female PETs in the study was 50.9 to 49.1 percent respectively. Majority of the PETs had a BA's degree (85%), 13.6 percent of them had an MA's degree, and 1.4 percent of them had other degrees. Most of the PETs (30.5%) had been teaching English for 11-15 years, 29.1 percent for over 20 years, 23.6 percent for 16-20 years, and 16.8 percent for 10 or under 10 years. The mean for the teachers' teaching experience was 16.51 out of 30.

Washback Effect of the UEE on PETs' Curricular Planning and Instruction

Generally, teachers' views about the UEE were negative and consistent regardless of their experience, gender, or degree. The findings from this study support the assumption that the UEE plays an important role in Iranian pre-university English education. All of the eight PETs who took part in the discussion remarked that the UEE was one of the main factors that affected their curricular planning and instruction which is in line with the findings from the survey questionnaire data. Each of the three dimensions of PETs'

perceptions regarding the washback effect of the UEE on their curricular planning and instruction are discussed as follows.

Teaching Methods

The second highest mean among the three subcategories regarding the level of PETs' perceptions of the UEE washback was related to the teaching methods dimension (3.89 out of 6).

In the second phase of the study, all of the eight interviewed teachers also reported that their teaching was test-oriented. The following quotation from one of them (M.S.) indicates how they perceive and respond to the impact of the UEE.

Every student's future is specified by the UEE. Therefore, it has a great impact on teaching method. Since the aim is to prepare students for the UEE and students are only required to recognize some multiple-choice items, I use only the translation method to improve my students' ability in selecting the best choices of the reading, vocabulary, and grammar exercises.

Syllabus Design

The first highest mean among the three subcategories regarding the level of PETs' perceptions of the UEE washback was related to the syllabus design dimension (3.98 out of 6). As to the qualitative data, only one of the interviewed teachers referred to syllabus design as an affected area by the UEE, but he didn't explain it.

Teaching Contents

The lowest mean among the three subcategories regarding the level of PETs' perceptions of the UEE washback was related to the teaching contents dimension (3.83 out of 6). Regarding the qualitative part of the study in the second phase, only two of the interviewed teachers just referred to the content without any explanations but five of them commented about using sample tests

and five referred to using test-related books to prepare their students for the UEE.

Factors Associated with PETs' Perceptions of the UEE Impact

In this study, four factors which were assumed to be closely associated with the UEE washback effect were studied. The findings related to these factors are discussed as follows.

Teaching Experience

The relationship between teachers' teaching experience and their perceptions of the impact of the UEE was investigated using Pearson product moment correlation coefficient. Before performing a correlation analysis, preliminary analyses were conducted to check the normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity assumptions. In this case, none of the assumptions was seriously violated

Based on the Pearson product moment correlation results (Table 5), there was no significant relationship between teachers' teaching experience and their perceptions of the impact of the UEE ($r = -.015$, $n = 205$, $p > .05$). This result suggests that almost all teachers, regardless of their experience, perceived the impact of the UEE similarly. Since the p-value is greater than .05, the null hypothesis fails to be rejected.

TABLE 5
Relationship Between Teachers' Teaching Experience and their Perceptions of the Impact of the UEE

		Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of the UEE	Teaching Experience
Teachers' perceptions of the impact of the UEE	Pearson Correlation	1	-.015
	Sig.(2-tailed)		.836
	N	205	205
Teaching experience	Pearson Correlation	-.015	1
	Sig.(2-tailed)	.836	
	N	205	220

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As to the interviewed teachers, most of them believed that they were affected by the UEE, irrespective of their experience. For example one of them (M.R.) stated:

I don't think teaching experience alone plays a positive or negative role. All of us, whether experienced or inexperienced, know that we cannot help teaching to the UEE because it affects our students' future success.

Education Background

As indicated in Table 6, there is no significant difference between the perception scores for the teachers with a BA degree ($M = 133.27$, $SD = 15.15$) and the perception scores for the teachers with an MA degree or above [$M = 134.96$, $SD = 12.91$; $t(203) = -.592$, $p. > .05$]. This result suggests that almost all teachers, regardless of their educational background, perceived the impact of the UEE on their curricular planning and instruction similarly. Since there is no significant difference between the means of the two groups, the null hypothesis fails to be rejected.

TABLE 6
Comparison of Teachers' Educational Backgrounds
Regarding their Perceptions of the Impact of the UEE

Education Background	N	Mean	Std Dev	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig.
Bachelor	173	133.2775	15.15783	-	203	.554
Master and above	32	134.9688	12.91532	.592		

None of the interviewed English teachers referred to educational background as a factor which seemed to influence their perception of the UEE. The following quotation (M.K.) reveals the effect of the UEE on teachers' perception regardless of their educational background.

No matter what degree we have. Students' success in the UEE is the end. If students' performance in the UEE or final exam is weak, some schools will replace the teacher with a master or even a PhD degree with a teacher who

has a bachelor degree but seems to be more successful in preparing students for the test.

Professionalism in Teaching

Based on the Pearson product moment correlation results (Table 7), there was a positive relationship between the two variables ($r = .388$, $n = 205$, $p < .05$), with high levels of teachers' perceptions of the impact of the UEE associated with their higher levels of perceived professionalism in teaching. Since the p-value is less than .05, the null hypothesis is rejected.

TABLE 7
Relationship between Professionalism in Teaching
and the Teachers' Perceptions of the Impact of the UEE

		Teachers' perception of the impact of the UEE	Perceived professionalism
Teachers' perception of the impact of the UEE	Pearson Correlation	1	.388**
	Sig.(2-taild)	205	205
	N		
Perceived professionalism	Pearson Correlation	.388**	1
	Sig.(2-taild)	205	220
	N		

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Half of the interviewed teachers referred to professionalism as an influential factor regarding their perceptions of the impact of the UEE. One of them (A.M.), for example, stated:

If your students do badly in the UEE, it means that you are not active and hardworking and even knowledgeable even though your students are able to communicate in English.

Gender

As indicated in Table 8, there is no significant difference between the perception scores for the male teachers ($M = 134.22$, $SD = 12.87$) and the perception scores for the female teachers [$M = 132.82$, $SD = 16.64$; $t(203) = .680$, $p. > .05$]. This result suggests that almost all teachers, regardless of their gender, perceived the impact of the UEE on their curricular planning and instruction similarly. Since there is no significant difference between the means of the two groups, the null hypothesis fails to be rejected.

TABLE 8
Comparison of Teachers' Genders
Regarding their Perceptions of the Impact of the UEE

Gender	N	Mean	Std Dev	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig.
Male	105	134.2286	12.87459	.680	203	.498
Female	100	132.8200	16.64446			

None of the interviewed teachers believed that gender influenced their teaching or curricular planning. Only one of them (M. K.) referred to it in relation to professionalism as follows:

I think female teachers are more sensitive to the people judgments as a good teacher, the colleagues' attitudes, the school authorities' viewpoint and of course their own criteria as a successful teacher. For this, they often feel embarrassed if their students do not perform well in the UEE.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study most of the surveyed and interviewed teachers, regardless of their experience, educational background and gender agreed that they perceived the negative effect of the UEE on their curricular planning and instruction. The findings imply that if the current UEE is not reformed to include and assess students' oral and aural skills, potentially

influential factors such as teachers' experience and educational background will play a neutral role in adopting effective teaching techniques. Thus, spending millions of Rials on training English teachers and improving their level of knowledge at teacher training colleges and universities would be a great loss.

To fully exploit the power of assessment to strengthen the country's English language education system, it is hoped that in the very near future the educational authorities decide to include the evaluation of oral and aural skills in the UEE. If this is done, the UEE will gain face, content, and construct validity and teachers will hopefully focus beyond reading skill alone. As it is, the UEE does not fulfill its theoretical goal of testing students' ability to use the language creatively for communicative purposes. Therefore, teachers' innovation and creativity are constrained and restricted so that they are unlikely to play a major role in fostering a positive washback in the current language education system.

Since the UEE is more likely to remain a facet of English education in Iran in the future, further research is in order. The observational and longitudinal studies seem to be more appropriate and valid to observe the true nature and depth of washback. What teachers say may be different from what they do, so more inclusive longitudinal studies, such as long-term classroom observations which were beyond the practicalities of this research, are required to explain how washback actually occurs to influence language teaching and learning. A single research like this, which relies only on what teachers perceive and say, is far from giving a definitive answer to questions about such a complex phenomenon as washback, rather it provides its own conclusions with caution.

It is hoped that the findings from this research and further empirical studies in the future will emerge and shed valuable light to help educators and testing authorities provide a more appropriate assessment tool with which to decide the future careers and lives of a very large number of Iranian students.

THE AUTHOR

*Mohammad Reza Ghorbani is TESL Ph.D. Candidate at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). His current research interests cover language teaching, testing, and evaluation. His recent publications include a book (2005) titled *Japanese Educational System* and another book (2001) *Class Action* (Translation from English into Persian), both published in Iran, and a paper titled All that Glitters is not Gold: Curriculum Alignment and Improving Students' Test Scores published in the *Iranian Journal of Language Studies (IJLS)*, Vol. 2(1), 2008 (pp. 19-40).
Email: mrg872@yahoo.com*

THE CO-AUTHORS IN ORDER OF PRIORITY

*Arshad Abd. Samad is an Associate Professor at the Department of Language and Humanities Education, Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. He also currently serves as the Deputy Dean at the Faculty of Educational Studies. His current research interests include Grammar Instruction, Language Assessment and Computer Assisted Language Learning.
Email: arshad@educ.upm.edu.my*

*Dr. Mohd Sahandri Gani Hamzah is currently associate professor at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. His areas of interest are research and evaluation of educational practices. He has been involved actively in Journal writing for years. He has presented and published his works in many Journal websites locally and internationally, in the form of seminar papers, proceedings, books, modules and journals.
Email: sahandri@putra.upm.edu.my*

Dr. Nooreen Noordin is currently a senior lecturer in the TESL unit at the Faculty of Educational Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Her areas of

interest are content-based instruction and computer assisted language learning. She is also actively involved in MELTA (Malaysia English Language Teachers Association), a voluntary association that encourages and organizes activities that are based on the teaching and learning of English as a second language.

Email: nooreen@educ.upm.edu.my or nooyeen@yahoo.com

REFERENCES

- Alderson, J. C., & Hamp-Lyons, L. (1996). TOEFL preparation courses: A study of washback. *Language Testing, 13*(3), 280-297.
- Alderson, J. C., & Wall, D. (1993). Does washback exist? *Applied Linguistics, 14*(2), 115-129.
- Ary, D., Jacob, L. C., & Razavieh, A. (2002). *Introduction to research in education*. 6th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Bailey, K. M. (1999). *Washback in Language testing*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service.
- Brown, J. D. (2000). *University entrance examinations: Strategies for creating positive washback on English language teaching in Japan*. Shiken: JALT Testing & Evaluation SIG Newsletter. 3(2): 4-8; Retrieved on 21 December 2006 from http://www.jalt.org/test/bro_5.htm
- Chen, L. (2002a). *Taiwanese junior high school English teachers' perceptions of the washback effect of the basic competence test in English*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. The Ohio State University, the United States.
- Chen, L. (2002b). *Washback of a public exam on English teaching*. Educational Resources Information Center on Assessment and Evaluation (ERIC/AE) ERIC Number: ED 472167.
- Cheng, L. (1997). How does washback influence teaching? Implications for Hong Kong. *Language Education, 11*(1), 38-54.
- Cheng, L. (1998). Impact of a public English examination change on students' perceptions and attitudes toward their English learning. *Studies in Educational Evaluation, 24*(3), 279-301.
- Cheng, L. (2000). *Washback or backwash: A review of the impact of testing on teaching and learning*. (ERIC Opinion papers ED 442280).
- Cheng, L. (2005). *Changing language teaching through language testing: A*

- washback study*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cimbricz, S. (2002, January 9). State-mandated testing and teachers' belief and practice [Electronic version]. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 10(2), Unfortunately the electronic version is without pagination Retrieved on March 19, 2007, from the World Side Web: <http://epaa.asu.edu/epaa/v10n2.html>
- Creswell, J. W. (2005). *Educational research – Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. New Jersey: Pearson.
- Dillman, D. A. (1978). *Mail and telephone surveys: The total design method*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.
- Gates, S. (1995). Exploiting washback from standardized tests. In J. D. Brown & S. O. Yamashita (Eds.), *Language testing in Japan* (pp. 101-106). Tokyo: Japan Association for Language Teaching.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (1997). Washback, impact and validity: Ethical concerns. *Language Testing*, 14(3), 295-303.
- Hamp-Lyons, L. (1999). Implications of the “examination culture” for (English language) education in Hong Kong. In V. Crew, V. Berry & J. Hung (Eds.), *Exploring diversity in the language curriculum* (pp. 133-141). Hong Kong: Hong Kong Institute of Education.
- Henrichsen, L. E. (1989). Diffusion of innovations in English language teaching: The ELEC effort in Japan, 1956-1968. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Herman, J. L., & Golan, S. (1991). *Effects of standardized testing on teachers and learning-Another look*. (CSE Technical Report No. 334). Los Angeles: University of California. Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student Testing.
- Hughes, A. (1988). Introducing a needs based test of English language proficiency into an English medium university in Turkey. In A. Hughes (Ed.), *Testing English for university study*. ELT Documents 127, (pp. 134-153). Oxford: Modern English Publications.
- Khaniya, T. R. (1990). The washback effect of a textbook-based test. *Edinburgh Working Papers in Applied Linguistics*. University of Edinburgh.
- Krejcie, R. V., & Morgan, D. W. (1970). Determining sample size for research activities. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 30, 607-610.
- Kruger, R. A. (1994). *Focus groups*. (2nd ed.). California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Krueger, R. A. (2002). *Designing and conducting focus group interviews*. University of Minnesota. Retrieved on 26 February, 2007, from the World Wide Web: http://www.shadac.umn.edu/img/assets/18528/FocGrp_Krueger_Oct02.pdf
- Madaus, G. (1988). The influence of testing on the curriculum. In L. Tanner (Ed.), *Critical issues in curriculum: 87th yearbook of the NSSE, Part 1* (pp. 83-121).

Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Messick, S. (1996). Validity and washback in language testing. *Language Testing*, 13, 241-256.
- Ostovar Namaghi, S. A. (2006). Forces steering Iranian language teachers' work: A grounded theory. *The Reading Matrix*, 6(2), 90-105.
- Popham, W. J. (1987). The merits of measurement-driven instruction. *Phi Delta Kappa*, 68, 679-682.
- Richards, J. C., Tung, P., & Ng, P. (1992). The culture of the English language teacher, A Hong Kong example. *RELC Journal*, 23, 18-102.
- Shohamy, E. (1993). The Power of Test: The Impact of Language Testing on Teaching and Learning. NFLC Occasional Papers. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 362 040).
- Shohamy, E., Donitsa-Schmidt S., & Ferman, I. (1996). Test impact revisited: Washback effect over time. *Language Testing*, 13, 298-317.
- Spratt, M. (2005). Washback and the classroom: the implications for teaching and learning of studies of washback from exams. *Language Teaching Research*, 9, 5-29.
- Wall, D. (1996). Introducing new tests into traditional systems: insights from general education and from innovation theory. *Language Testing*, 13(3), 334-354.
- Wall, D. (1998). Impact and Washback in Language Testing. In Corson, D. & Clapham, C. (Eds.), *Language testing and assessment* (pp. 291-302). Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Wall, D., & Alderson, C. (1996). Examination washback: the Sri Lankan Impact study. In A., Cumming & R. Berwick (Eds.), *Validation in language testing* (pp. 194-221). Philadelphia: Multilingual Matters.
- Watanabe, Y. (1996a). Does grammar translation come from the entrance examination? Preliminary findings from classroom-based research. *Language Testing*, 13(3), 318-333.
- Watanabe, Y. (1996b). *Investigating washback in Japanese EFL classrooms: Problems of methodology*. Canberra, Australia: Applied Linguistics Association of Australia.

APPENDIX A

Instructions on Systematic and Note-Based Content Analysis Process

I. Start while still in the group

1. Listen for inconsistent comments and probe for understanding
1. Listen for vague or cryptic comments and probe for understanding
2. Consider asking each participant a final preference question
3. Offer a summary of key questions and seek confirmation

II. Immediately after the focus group

4. Draw a diagram of seating arrangement
5. Spot check tape recording to ensure proper operation
6. Conduct moderator and assistant moderator debriefing
7. Note themes, hunches, interpretations, and ideas
8. Compare and contrast this focus group to other groups
9. Label and file field notes, tapes and other materials

III. Soon after the focus group--within hours analyze individual focus group.

10. Make back-up copy of tapes
11. Listen to tape, review field notes and read transcript if available
12. Prepare report of the individual focus group in a question-by-question format with amplifying quotes
13. Share report for verification with assistant moderator

IV. Later--within days analyze the series of focus groups

14. Compare and contrast results by categories of individual focus groups
15. Look for emerging themes by question and then overall
16. Construct typologies or diagram the analysis
17. Describe findings and use quotes to illustrate

V. Finally, prepare the report

18. Consider narrative style versus bulleted style
19. Use a few quotes to illustrate
20. Sequence could be question by question or by theme
21. Share report for verification
22. Revise and finalize report

APPENDIX B

TABLE 1
Demographic Characteristics of the Interviewed PETs

Characteristics	Number
School location	
Suburban	4
Urban	4
Total	8
School type	
Public	6
Private	2
Total	8
Gender	
Male	4
Female	4
Total	8
Degree	
BA	6
MA	2
Total	8
Teaching experience	
10 or under 10	2
11-15	2
16-20	2
20 or over 20	2
Total	8