



Washback Effect of the English Proficiency Test (EPT) on PhD Candidates' Language Learning Strategies

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Received: October 31, 2020

Accepted: May 19, 2021

Abstract

Washback has been defined as the impact of testing on curriculum design, teaching practice, and learning behaviours. The English Proficiency Test (EPT) is a high-stakes test in Iran and is prone to bring degrees of washback both at micro and macro levels. This study was an attempt to examine the washback effect of the EPT on Iranian PhD candidates' language learning strategies. To this end, a mixed-methods approach of data collection was used to collect, analyze, and integrate quantitative and qualitative data to reach a better grasp of the research topic and enhance the validity and reliability of the information. Based on the sequential exploratory design, two phases of data collection were conducted with a two-week interval. In the first phase, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was administered to 200 students at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan). In the second phase, 20 students who filled out the questionnaire showed their willingness to participate in the

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interview session and write their language learning diaries. Finally, the quantitative and qualitative data were analyzed via descriptive and thematic analysis, respectively. The results showed both positive and negative washback effects on the students' language learning strategies. The findings of this study have practical implications for EFL language teachers, syllabus designers, and material developers.

Keywords: English Proficiency Test (EPT); Language Learning Strategies; Washback

INTRODUCTION

The term washback or backwash has been defined as the effect of testing on curriculum design, teaching practices, and learning behaviours. Nowadays, washback has a pivotal role inside and outside the educational institutions with positive or negative effect that can exert. Alderson and Wall (1993) addressed the possibility of washback existence and insufficient empirical research conducted into the nature of washback. From then on, a good number of researchers have examined the washback concept and investigated the tests footprint on teachers, students, and educational systems in different parts of the world. All of the studies have updated and developed a substantial knowledge of washback phenomenon (e.g., Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Alderson & Wall, 1993; S Andrews, 1994; Stephen Andrews, Fullilove, & Wong, 2002; Chen, 2009; L. Cheng, 1999; Hsu, 2010; Hughes, 1989; Hughes, 2003; Luxia, 2005; Muñoz & Álvarez, 2010; Ramezaney, 2014; Rezvani & Sayyadi, 2016; Saif, 2006; Salehi & Yunus, 2012; Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman, 1996; Spratt, 2005; Stobart, 2003; Taqizadeh & Birjandi, 2015; Wall, 2000; Watanabe, 1996).

The absence of research on the relationship between washback of high-stakes tests such as EPT and language learning strategies is another important point to consider. As Cheng et al. (2004) stated, it is crystal clear that high-stakes tests have a noticeable washback effect on teaching and learning in different educational contexts. As a high-stakes test, English Proficiency Test (EPT) would perhaps exert a significant washback effect on language learning strategies that Iranian PhD students may use. The question is whether or not EPT exerts an influence on the language learning strategies and if yes, would that influence be positive or negative? Therefore, the present study was an attempt to investigate the washback effect of EPT on Iranian PhD students' language learning strategies.

Literature Review

Since the context of each test is essential in washback studies, some recent Iranian washback studies are reviewed in this section.

Pakzad and Salehi (2018) investigated the washback effect of TEFL M.A. exam on Iranian lecturers' classroom activities through integrating quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Data were collected in two phases with a two-week interval. In the first

phase, a valid and reliable researcher-made questionnaire was administered to 16 Iranian university lecturers and in the second phase, an interview protocol was used to interview five lecturers. The findings indicated that the TEFL MA exam did not have any washback effect on lecturers' classroom activities and teaching methodology.

Khanshan (2018) explored the washback effect of Iranian PhD candidates' entrance exam on language learners' achievement in reading comprehension. This study explored the ways in which the washback effect could modulate the choice of reading texts in the classroom, their difficulty level, and their effectiveness from test takers' viewpoints. The participants were 48 state and private MA students in TEFL. They were required to fill out the researcher-developed questionnaire and answer the open-ended questions. The findings showed that the entrance exam had a positive washback effect on learners' reading comprehension in several ways. Moreover, textbooks with a moderate level of difficulty were believed to be more effective by test takers.

Amini-Farsani (2018) examined the National English Exam (NEE) washback effect on teachers and language learners to find out whether or not it had any washback effect on EFL teachers and learners. The sample of the study consisted of 15 Iranian EFL teachers and 90 students. The data were collected through teacher and learner questionnaires, including 13 items reflecting the 13 sections of the NEE. The findings indicated that the NEE exerted a washback effect concerning the content of the

educational program, methods of high school English instruction, the test construction and administration procedure, the types of tests used in high school classes, the way the participants perceive the test items and the students' and the teachers' attitude toward it. Moreover, the NEE had some positive and negative washback effects on the English language teaching-learning process. The study provided some strategies to improve the positive washback effect and to reduce the negative ones.

Estaji and Ghiasvand (2019) investigated the washback effect of the IELTS examination on Iranian EFL instructors' professional identity. Using critical course observation, questionnaires, and interviews, they concluded that instructors' professional identity is closely connected to their past IELTS-related experiences. They also reported that the instructors feel that they have to work for the test rather than improve the learners' literacy skills.

Siahpoosh, et al. (2019) investigated the washback effect of IELTS on learners' perspective, expectations, and learning priority when preparing for the writing section of the test. In total, 20 Iranian IELTS learners and 10 non-IELTS learners were requested to fill out a questionnaire about their ideal IELTS writing course expectations. They found that the test has a negative washback effect on learners' perspective as they expect the preparation courses to comply with the IELTS exam standard. However, the positive effect of the test was that it encourages the learners to

expand their general knowledge of vocabulary and writing style.

Moradi (2019) examined the washback effect of the centralized final exams in Payame Noor University (PNU) on both teaching and learning and she tried to figure out whether the effect was positive or negative. The statistical results showed that the exams administrated in PNU had a relatively positive washback effect on learning and students were supported with their professors' recommendations to do their best in the exams. She also showed that this has greatly influenced the teaching methodologies applied in the PNU because professors usually coordinate their teaching methods to the test format and empower students by providing them with recent exams.

Razavipour, et al. (2020) explored the effect of IELTS on the classroom climate in which candidates are preparing for the speaking section. They compared one IELTS speaking preparation course with a general conversation course. Observation and distributing questionnaires found that there was less support from the teachers in the test preparation class, and students were less involved than the General English course. They concluded that this may be due to the instrumental motivation of students that encourages the teacher to overlook some central aspects of an ideal language class.

Estaji and Alikhani (2020) examined the washback effect of the First Certificate in English (FCE) exam on textbook and materials development from teachers' and learners' viewpoints. Applying questionnaire and interview as two research instruments, they

found that FCE textbooks have a positive washback effect: the textbooks and materials largely reflect exam requirements as the learners relied on the exam requirement to study the course. Teachers' and learners' perceptions of the exam were not the same and they reported that teachers had a more profound opinion of the requirement than learners did.

Shirzadi and Amerian (2020) examined the washback effect of different test formats (multiple-choice, cloze and metalinguistic forms) on students' writing skills. They found that the positive washback effect was on learners' grammatical point due to the supportive teaching method where instructors clearly explained the points. They also showed that cloze test and multiple-choice test formats are appropriate activities for accurate grammar productions, proving that the content of materials contributes to the washback effect.

Despite the accumulating evidence that washback plays a significant role in language teaching and learning, far too little attention has been paid to washback and language learning strategies. Many teacher factors have been investigated in washback studies; however, there is scarcity of washback research on learner factors.

METHODS

Participants

To have the prospective participants, all stages of the study were conducted in Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) branch where

many PhD students were studying. The participants had the following characteristics:

- i. They were male and female PhD students from different fields of geography, history, psychology, Persian literature, physical education, accounting, industrial management, and business management
- ii. Their age was within the range of 24 to 44 years old. They were from different cities and different parts of the country.
- iii. The participants were volunteers and they were willing to discuss the topic without force.

Design of the Study

In order to understand how EPT exerts influence on Iranian PhD students' language learning strategies, methodological triangulation was utilized. Given the data collection instruments including questionnaire, interview, and learning diary, this study employed an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design.

Instruments

In order to collect the required quantitative and qualitative data, the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL), an interview protocol, and learning diaries were used as valid and reliable research instruments in this study. These instruments were employed together in order to triangulate the data derived from the participants.

Procedure

Administering the SILL Questionnaire

The Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) was employed as a valid and reliable instrument in the survey phase of the study and its Persian version was administered to 200 Iranian PhD students at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) branch. This questionnaire was primarily employed to explore the washback effect of EPT on language learning strategies that Iranian PhD students use. The SILL questionnaire has two versions, one with 80 items and the other with 50 items. The versions are different in that the 80-item version is designed for those whose first language is English and are learning another language, and the second version is for those whose first language is not English and their second language is English. Both versions have six sections to measure including cognitive, metacognitive, social, mnemonic, compensatory, and affective strategies.

The SILL questionnaire is designed based on a five-point Likert scale in which the respondents may choose among 1= never or rarely true of me, 2 = usually not true of me, 3 = somewhat true of me, 4 = usually true of me, and 5 = always or almost always true of me. The questionnaire starts with instructions by which the respondents are informed about the strategies they might use.

Conducting the Interview

The second instrument to collect the required data was an interview protocol. First, a list of interview questions was prepared and some



initial modifications were made on the list to fit the questions to mirror the essence of the research questions. Then, in order to ensure the content validity, the first draft of the interview protocol was checked by two experts in the field. They were required to evaluate each interview question based upon two criteria: (i) the question is appropriate to represent the topic, and (ii) the meaning of the question is clear. Based on the experts' useful tips and suggestions, some modifications were made on the interview protocol. Then, the second draft was piloted on two Iranian PhD students to make sure whether interview questions were clear for the prospective participants. The pilot study proved that all the questions were straightforward enough and the interviewees had no difficulty in wordings or structures of the questions.

Since the interviewees were Farsi native speakers, the interview protocol was translated to Farsi using back translation technique. To select the required sample for the interview, 20 Iranian PhD students (one tenth of the whole participants) were invited and accepted to participate in the interview. They had already participated in the survey phase and had filled out the questionnaire. All the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Finally, the transcribed interviews were organized, coded, and analyzed.

Writing Learning Diaries

The last data collection instrument was learning diaries. To start the process of writing learning diaries, Iranian PhD students were asked to start

writing their diaries both during the time they were preparing for the EPT and after receiving their EPT scores. To this end, the participants were asked to write a Persian learning diary with two to three pages.

Since Iranian PhD students had different levels of English proficiency and they were studying in different fields except English, Persian was used as the medium of writing the diaries. The participants were required to write about the challenges they had encountered for learning English, and the language learning strategies that they had used when preparing for the EPT. It was also suggested to write about any kind of maturation that might had happened during the time of the EPT preparation journey.

RESULTS

Phase I: Quantitative Data Analysis

This study was an attempt to examine the washback effect of EPT on Iranian PhD students' language learning strategies including cognitive, metacognitive, social, mnemonic, compensatory and affective strategies. Therefore, to analyze the quantitative data collected through the SILL questionnaire, the returned questionnaires were first labeled and categorized. Inasmuch as each choice in this Likert-scale questionnaire carried a point, the mean score of each questionnaire item was compared with the average score of the choices (i.e. 3.00). This would mean that if the mean score of a questionnaire item was greater than 3.00, the respondents tended to use that strategy quite frequently. On the other hand, a mean

score less than 3.00 indicated the respondents' inclination to use that strategy infrequently. The significance or non-significance of the results obtained for the cognitive, metacognitive,

social, mnemonic, compensatory, and affective strategies of the questionnaire is determined in Table 1 below.

Table 1
One-sample t Test Results for the SILL Questionnaire

| | Test Value = 3 | | | | | |
|---------------|----------------|-----------|--------------|------------------------|---|-------|
| | <i>t</i> | <i>df</i> | Overall Mean | <i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed) | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
| | | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Cognitive | .67 | 8 | 3.04 | .51 | -.10 | .19 |
| Metacognitive | 1.05 | 13 | 3.06 | .31 | -.06 | .18 |
| Social | 1.32 | 5 | 3.15 | .24 | -.14 | .44 |
| Mnemonic | 4.35 | 8 | 3.32 | .00 | .15 | .49 |
| Compensatory | 2.62 | 5 | 3.40 | .04 | .008 | .79 |
| Affective | -1.53 | 5 | 2.90 | .18 | -.24 | .06 |

As Table 1 shows, the overall mean scores for the cognitive ($M = 3.04$), metacognitive ($M = 3.06$), social ($M = 3.15$), mnemonic ($M = 3.32$), and compensatory ($M = 3.40$) strategies were above average, showing that the students preparing for the EPT frequently used these strategies. However, the only strategies used of statistical significance were the mnemonic and compensatory strategies since the p values corresponding to these strategies under the *Sig.* (2-tailed) column in Table 1 were found to be less than .05 significance level ($p < .05$). On the other hand, for affective strategies, the overall

mean score was 2.90, meaning that the students did not use this type of strategy frequently, yet the extent of not using this strategy was not of statistical significance.

Phase II: Qualitative Data Analysis

Two different methods of qualitative data elicitation (interviews and learning diaries) were applied to collect the required data. The transcribed interviews were meticulously reviewed to identify the general segments reflecting the participants' attitudes towards

language learning strategies. To do so, data were critically sorted and coded. Next, each code frequency was extracted to identify the prominent themes. Then, the emerging themes were analyzed and interpreted independently and critically by two experts to ensure reliability.

To further consolidate the results, the participants were requested to write down their learning diaries when they were preparing to take the EPT. Finally, the entire corpus was read to code and sub-code the obtained data. The coding procedures were as follows:

Stage One (Open Coding): In this stage, each paragraph of raw textual data (from interviews and learning diaries) was given a label or concept category that eventually helped to extract and generate themes. The main purpose of open coding was to obtain different aspects of language learning strategies, language learning materials, and language learning perceptions and attitudes. In this stage, 19 different codes were developed, e.g. grammar practice, higher involvement, systematic learning, improved language learning, change (in L2 learning), higher-level of motivation, maturity, external motivation, willingness to communicate, meaningful learning, vocabulary learning, attitude change with regards to exam preparation, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, stay positive, grammar analysis, improved understanding, vocabulary conceptualization, learning in context, etc. In the second stage, some of these codes were omitted and some others were modified and only the major themes remained.

Stage Two (Axial Coding): In stage two, the probable interfaces and linkages between some of the emerging themes were analyzed. The constant comparison across different data facilitated the emergence of continuous themes. Then, the sub-themes were incorporated, classified, and designated into more significant thematic categories. After such thematic connections, four main emergent categories were identified: perceptions of language learning, language learning strategies, language learning materials, and guessing intelligently.

Stage Three (Selective Coding): In this stage as the final stage of coding, the core categories and all other categories related to core ones were chosen. In fact, the emerging themes in the data were exposed. This coding aimed to combine different categories that were developed, elaborated, and mutually related into one cohesive category.

Synthesizing the Results

The analysis of the accumulated data from three different data collection methods (i.e., SILL questionnaire, interviews, and learning diaries) indicated that the students preparing for the EPT often apply cognitive, metacognitive, social, and mnemonic strategies but only the use of mnemonic strategies was of statistical significance. On the other hand, although the PhD students did not apply compensatory and affective strategies very frequently, the extent of not using these strategies was not statistically significant. Furthermore, the participants had

overall positive attitude towards English learning in general.

DISCUSSIONS

The findings of this study are consistent with those of Maniruzzaman (2016) who found that language learners spend a great deal of time for test preparation in order to only gain a high score. Language learners do not spend time learning language learning strategies; they mainly work on the skills they will test on the exam. This finding was also confirmed in the present study because most EPT applicants used language learning strategies, but the only statistical significance strategies were compensatory and mnemonic. Furthermore, according to Sadighi et al. (2018), new high school English textbooks in Iran are designed to reach communicative teaching and learning goals; however, teachers and students are highly affected by the exam goals and do not go for communicative teaching and learning. Perhaps this is one of the major reasons that Iranian students have problems with using language learning strategies. In fact, the two strategies that Iranian students have used are those that help them with their reading comprehension ability.

Damankesh and Babaii (2015) concluded that high school final exams significantly affect learners' learning and their strategic behaviors. Therefore, perhaps, Iranian students who have been participating in this exam have gained the strategic behaviors and have shown these strategic behaviors in their interviews several times. Rezvani and Sayyadi (2016) showed that

Iranian students need to make use of their cognitive abilities more in the newly developed entrance exam of the universities. Therefore, it might be the nature of EPT that Iranian students have used cognitive strategies. In another study, Soomro and Memon (2016) concluded that a language teacher should use materials, contents, and methodologies to reach his or her goal in the exam, which puts a greater amount of pressure on both language learners and teacher. So, perhaps the main reason that Iranian students ignored some language learning strategies and made use of specific strategies was that they wanted to reach some exam-related goals: reading comprehension, vocabulary learning, and structure learning activities.

Messick (1996) stated that washback might be positive or negative. This study showed that Iranian PhD students used compensatory and mnemonic strategies, so that it can be claimed that EPT has exerted a negative washback effect on the students' language learning strategies. In their study, Pakzad and Salehi (2018) concluded that Iranian students used translated versions of the textbooks and put more emphasis on learning by rote, improving test taking strategies, and engaging in exam preparation activities. In the same way, PhD students in the present study switched to their mother tongue and used linguistic clues and other strategies related to compensation. These are well shown in their learning diaries too.

Furthermore, as EFL teachers should strictly adhere to the content of EPT administered nationwide in Iran as a prerequisite for a comprehensive exam in PhD program in

Islamic Azad University, they have to ignore modern teaching perspectives and sacrifice communicative teaching methods in favor of following the format and content of the EPT. Therefore, to amend the unfavourable consequence of EPT, test preparation standards should carefully address the significant objectives of second language learning.

CONCLUSION

It was concluded that EPT applicants frequently used cognitive, metacognitive, social, compensatory, and mnemonic strategies. However, the only strategies used of statistical significance were the mnemonic and compensatory strategies. On the other hand, for affective strategies, the overall mean score was 2.90, meaning that the students did not frequently use this type of strategy, yet the extent of not using this strategy was not of statistical significance.

The findings have important implications for language teachers in general, EFL language teachers, syllabus designers, and material developers. Implementing language learning strategies in language learning classes or learning settings from the very beginning can increase language learners' awareness regarding efficient pedagogical practices while learning a new language. Moreover, language learning strategies awareness might deepen understanding of the teacher's processes while teaching the learners to learn a language. This might provide teacher educators, syllabus designers, and learning materials developers with opportunities to gain fruitful insights into

implementing and incorporating language learning strategies into both teacher education programs and language learning programs.

Taken together, it can be suggested that language learning strategies should be incorporated in teacher education programs, either as an independent course or as a component of an existing course. However, it is important to bear in mind that language learning strategies should emerge from the interest and concerns of the teachers and not solely from the learning materials compulsory agenda.

The education system and teacher training institutes should establish a workable and fair system of rewards for language teachers to receive credit to continue professional development by establishing language learning classes enriched with language learning strategies. Engaging EFL teachers in teaching the strategies of learning a new language in a learning setting provides beneficial results both for learners and teachers.

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