Research Article

A Qualitative Study of Washback Effects of MSRT Test on Iranian PhD Candidates' Attitudes toward English Language Learning Skills

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ABSTRACT

In Iran, the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT) examination is a high-stakes test that has the potential to cause varying levels of washback at both individual and societal levels. Despite its significance for candidates, there appears to be insufficient emphasis on investigating the washback, particularly the impact of MSRT on the English language learning skills of Iranian candidates. Thus, the current research aimed to investigate the modifications that Iranian doctoral students regarded as more advantageous in utilizing the MSRT module for the purpose of English education. With this objective in mind, a survey based on the MSRT washback was administered to a group of 150 PhD students selected from Islamic Azad universities located in Shiraz and Marvdasht, who varied in terms of their gender, age, and field of study. A mixture of stratified and convenience sampling methods was employed to choose the study participants. In the second stage of the research, a purposive sampling approach was used to select 30 PhD candidates from the same population to participate in the semi-structured interviews. The findings from the data analysis revealed both favorable and unfavorable consequences of MSRT washback. In addition, it was observed that MSRT preparation did not adequately equip the students with English listening and speaking skills, which are crucial for their academic English needs, in contrast to their reading and writing capabilities.

Introduction

It is generally believed that tests have a powerful influence on language learners who prepare themselves to take the tests, and on the teachers who help learners to prepare. The term washback or backwash has been defined as the effect of testing on curriculum design, teaching practices, and learning behaviors and is a well-researched academic concept common to nearly all institutional learning processes. As Gates (1995) defined it, it is the influence of testing on teaching

and learning. Nowadays, washback has a pivotal role inside and outside educational institutions with positive or negative effects that can exert. Alderson and Wall (1993) addressed the possibility of washback existence and insufficient empirical research conducted into the nature of washback. Alderson and Wall (1993) claim the existence of washback and believe that "... tests are held to be powerful determiners of what happens in the classrooms" (p. 41). Buck (1988) defines washback as "a natural tendency for both students and teachers to tailor the classroom activities to the demands of the test, especially when the test is particularly important for test takers" (p. 17). For Messick (1996) a poor test may be associated with positive effects and a good test with negative effects because of other things that are done or not done in the preparation classroom.

The experiential washback studies started in the early 1980s and attracted more attention in the 1990s (e.g., Hughes, 1988; Koretz, Linn, Dunbar, & Shepard, 1991; Shepard, 1991; Wesdorp, 1983). 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). More research studies should be undertaken to examine washback qualitatively and quantitatively (Chen, 2002a; Cheng, 2005).

Washback as a viable tool for professional language testing has been integrated in L2 assessment to offer practical solutions to common obstacles and dilemmas in a specific teaching/learning context (Indrawati, 2018). In this connection, it is often argued that through application of washback studies, a test designer might become more apprehensive of 'problematizing' a particular practice and be more explicit in naming a problem (Ghorbani, Samad, & Gani, 2008). Noteworthy, washback studies can provide invaluable opportunities to assist teachers, exam developers, and material developers to problematize through a deep reflection on processes, challenges, and outcomes of exams. In addition to preparing for the test, students also participate in other learning practices, such as regular learning performances. Therefore, whether and to what extent learning practices and activities, beyond that of test preparation, are influenced by the attitudes of the examiners from an examination and to what extent they can play a role in the results.

As Cheng and Watanabe (2004) stated, the convincing evidence is that high-stakes tests have a powerful washback effect on teaching and learning in different educational contexts. In this study where MSRT is a high-stakes test, it is perhaps going to exert a great washback effect on Iranian PhD candidates' learning materials. MSRT, as a high-stakes test, attracts a great number of Iranian PhD candidates each year. The question is whether the MSRT exam can have an impact on the language learning abilities of the candidates or not.

However, the issue of PhD candidates' insight into the washback of the MSRT module in English learning has so far been intact. To the best of the knowledge of the researchers, to date, it seems that limited studies have been carried out in this field to be able to examine washback to the learners from the MSRT test in the Iranian EFL context.

The degree to which the learning skills of Iranian PDH candidates are impacted by the washback effect of MSRT is a matter that can be debated. As per Ahmadi Safa and Goodarzi's (2014) statement, several washback studies do not aim to investigate the outcomes of learning. Hence, it is crucial to efficiently administer research investigations on the impact of exam washback on learning outcomes. The objective of this particular research was to evaluate how the washback effect of MSRT influences the English language learning of Iranian PhD candidates pursuing postgraduate studies, specifically in PhD programs within Iran. To fulfill the purpose of the present study, the following question was formulated:

What changes do Iranian PhD candidates perceive as essential to make the MSRT module implementation more useful for English learning?

Literature review
Theoretical Background of Washback

According to Alderson and Wall (1993), washback took place when teachers and learners did things which they would not do if there was no test. On the other hand, washback generally refers to the effects of an assessment on teaching and learning in an educational system (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Some studies conclude that no washback effect occurs (Alderson & HampLyons, 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). Washback might be positively effective in teaching and learning. As mentioned, positive washback might be supported by changing the content factors of the design and interpretation of the test as well as modifying the test preparation factors. However, negative (harmful) washback has been reported when teachers and students devote most of their efforts to the content of tests (Saville, 2009). So the teaching-learning process, improved motivation among teachers and learners, and encouraged the idea of lifelong learning might be impacted positively by good exams (Pan, 2009). Furthermore, washback can play a role among language learners and their insights on the washback effects of language-related tests.

Washback to learners and learning is influenced by beliefs, educational experience, and contextual conditions, as shown by washback studies. (Gosa, 2004; Xie & Andrews, 2013; Zhan & Andrews, 2014; Zhan & Wan, 2016). In 2007, Shih identified various student factors that were linked to the educational environment and appeared to limit the washback effects of the General English Proficiency Test in technical colleges in Taiwan. Noteworthy, students had little chance to practice speaking, which seemed to be peripheral to the Taiwanese students' language learning experience. Therefore, it appeared that students did not have the necessary resources to prepare for the speaking component of the test, which was evident in the use of a broad and sometimes disorganized range of test preparation methods. The test takers' prior experience with exams could be a significant factor in determining their test preparation strategies. They may have negative attitudes toward tests, as described by Cheng (1998), and varying levels of anxiety, as indicated by Shohamy (1993), Smyth and Banks (2012), and Tsagari (2007). In Tsagari's (2007) research study, for example, one student's experience made him cognizant of his level in connection to the demands of the exam and enhanced his determination to boost his efforts in the future.

Conceptual Model of Washback on Learning

Prior research has found that stakeholders' attitudes or beliefs about tests can affect their actions, as demonstrated in studies by Chapman and Snyder (2000), Mizutan (2009), and Xie (2015). Additionally, some studies have shown that stakeholders' actions can impact their outcomes and results, such as those conducted by Xie (2013) and Zhang (2008). The term "washback" is frequently used in literature to describe the impact of testing on teaching and learning. Previous studies have explored this phenomenon, and as a result, a conceptual framework was developed. Wall and Alderson (1993) created the washback hypothesis, and since then some studies have been done on it (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Chen, 002a, 2002b; Cheng, 1997, 1998, 2000, 2005; Hamp-Lyons, 1997; Spratt, 2005). The washback hypothesis is a branch of the impact theory, which seeks to examine how a test is related to the society in which it is implemented, as noted by Wall in 1996 and 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. Hughes' (1993) trichotomy of the washback model correctly presented a theoretical framework for describing the relationship between learning and the test. According to Hughes (1993), the characteristics of

a test can initially shape the opinions and beliefs of those involved, which, in turn, could affect their actions and behavior during the task or process. As a result, this could impact the end result of the learning process or the final product, as suggested by Mizutan (2009).

Washback and Language Learning

Initially, the importance of using learning strategies was highlighted in the learning process. Woolfolk (1998) stated that a learning strategy was a technique utilized to achieve the learning objectives. Sadeghi et al. (2021) viewed the use of specific learning strategies for test preparation as a prompt and reliable measure of students' language proficiency. Meanwhile, Cheng and Watanabe (2004) posited that high-stakes tests had a significant impact on teaching and learning across various educational environments. Jamalifar et al. (2021) found both positive and negative washback effects on the students' language learning strategies. Their findings presented practical implications for EFL language teachers, syllabus designers, and material developers. Afzal (2016) conducted an evaluation of how high-stakes tests, like IELTS, influenced the thinking and instructional approaches of teachers, providing an extensive understanding of the teaching and learning process in test preparation courses. Interestingly, the learners in Mickan and Motteram's (2009) examination were already familiar with IELTS, many had taken it several times and some of the case studies reported that they had studied for the test before arriving in Australia. As a result, the observed washback effect occurred later compared to their initial encounter with the exam.

Research on washback has shown that the impact on learners and learning is influenced by their beliefs, educational background, and contextual factors, as evidenced by studies conducted by Gosa (2004), Xie and Andrews (2013), Zhan and Andrews (2014), and Zhan and Wan (2016). Green (2007) suggests that the characteristics and values of participants, such as their familiarity and comprehension of the exam, available resources to fulfill the test demands, and their willingness to accept these demands, as well as their perceptions of the importance and difficulty of the test, could all impact washback. Ward and Xu (1994) examined the effect of teaching on summarization skills on TOEFL scores. Bachman, Davidson, Ryan, and Choi (1995) examined the effect of a preparation course for the First Certificate in English (FCE) test on both FCE and TOEFL. Nguyen (2007) examined the impact of a preparation course on both the TOEFL iBT Listening and the IELTS Listening tests.

Apart from distinguishing between negative and positive washback, Watanabe (2004) identified other aspects of washback, including duration, magnitude, specificity, and intentionality. The duration dimension of washback pertained to whether the influence of a test persisted for a brief or prolonged duration. Short-term washback occurred when tests only influenced teaching and learning for a limited period of time such as the influence of an entrance examination which can only observed before examinees take the test and fades away when the admission decision was made. In contrast, a long-term washback occurred if the test findings had a long-term effect on how teaching and learning occurred for instance, an entrance examination continues to exert effect on test takers after they take the test (Watanabe, 2004).

Few research investigations have been carried out regarding the impact of assessments on the mindset and outlook of students, as mentioned. For example, Weili (2010) revealed that the new College English Test 4 Listening Comprehension Subtest (CET 4 LCS) yielded more positive than negative effects on learners' attitudes. Learners' attitude towards certain objective aspects of the listening subtest, such as test design, test format's reliability, and scoring criterion was positive. Dong et al. (2021) found that the National Matriculation English Test (NMET) in China affected the learning motivation of Chinese senior high school students and that the effects were mediated by gender, grade and proficiency level. Tsang and Isaacs (2022) conducted research on the washback effects of the graded approach used in the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education English Language Examination (HKDSE-English). Their study showed that the individuals who took the test had a favorable attitude toward it. Furthermore, the

results indicated that learner washback is a construct that is negotiated within a social context.

In the context of Iran as an EFL context, some studies touched on the nature of washback and learners, for instance, Khanshan (2018) studied the washback impact of Iranian upper graduate students' entrance test on language students' attainment in reading ability. Results suggested than books with a reasonable difficulty level were thought to be more useful by participants. Pakzad and Salehi (2018) through generating qualitative and quantitative data collection methods examined the influence of TEFL M.A. tests on Iranian lecturers' classroom activities. The findings showed that the TEFL MA exam did not have any washback effect on teaching methodology and lecturers' classroom activities. Shirzadi and Amerian (2020) assessed the washback impact of several test formats on students' writing skills. They resulted that the washback effect could be influenced by the content of materials.

While some research studies on several high-stakes exams like GMATE (General Multimedia Assisted Test of English) revealed a washback on the students' preparation practices (Gennaro, 2017), a modest shift was observed in their test preparation practices for a proficiency test (Pan & Newfields, 2013). A number of research scholars (Liu, 2014; Noviana & Ardi, 2020) also assessed examinees' preparation strategies for TOEFL iBT.

Given the recent and important status of the MSRT exam in Iran`s postgraduate programs presented in IAUs, it seems that almost all Iranian PhD candidates studying at different branches across the country need to achieve the acceptance score in this test to graduate. This can play a significant role in these skill tests for doctorate programs in Iranian universities, as it can have a serious impact on students' learning journey and their educational position. It also means that all Iranian PhD candidates should improve their English language knowledge. Accordingly, the MSRT exam will probably have a great washback effect on the learning skills of Iranian PhD candidates. Therefore, the present article was an attempt to investigate the washback effect of the MSRT test on Iranian PhD candidates' learning skills.

Methodology

A concurrent qualitative research design was used to explore how Iranian PhD students realized washback effects. The qualitative part of the study, however, played a more significant role in the present study as it was related to how washback effects were realized. Next, the qualitative section, which was concerned with the participants' open-ended answers to questions and semi-structured interviews, were coded and analyzed based on students' comments up to the point where the researcher could gain a more comprehensive insight on the role of the washback. The participants included both 150 Iranian PhD students (64 male and 86 female candidates) at the Islamic Azad universities of Shiraz and Marvdasht were chosen through a combination of stratified and convenience sampling methods. All of the participants had taken the MSRT exam within the last year. The instruments that were used in the present study include interviews and open-ended questions.

Instruments

Two data-gathering tools were used in this study. The first was two open-ended questions; one question intends to elicit participants' suggestions on how to make the MSRT test more helpful for university English learning, and the other to comment on any issues not covered in the previous items. The second data gathering tool was a semi-structured interview composed of six sections, intending to elicit the thirty interviewees' perceptions on 1) the MSRT test purposes, 2) the MSRT test washback on handling university workload, 3) the MSRT test washback on university English learning, 4) the MSRT test washback on their worries in university English learning, 5) the MSRT test washback on their university English learning activities and test preparation strategies, and 6) their suggestions to make the MSRT test more useful for university English learning. The validity of the interviews were checked by the same experts in a similar vein. However, to ensure the reliability of the interpretations, the comments of

two raters (one TEFL professor, and one PhD holder) were reviewed on the 5 transcripts to ensure that inter-rater agreement was met.

Data Collection and analytical procedures

In the summer of 2022 Data were collected. In this regard, the consent forms were distributed in person. Next, the candidates who met the criteria for inclusion were called for interviews to the point where the researchers agreed on data saturation. Given the restricting conditions of the world due to the COVID-19 epidemic, the study was conducted online in the Persian language. Each interview took around 20 to 35 minutes, depending on the interviewees' willingness to talk, and was audiotaped for transcription and translated into English. Accordingly, any losses of meaning or distortions in the initial translation were identified and corrected to preserve the most accurate version of what the students provided.

The analysis of the qualitative data from the two open-ended questions and the interviews were conducted based on the guidance presented by Schmidt (2004). His five-step semi-structured interview analytical strategy was adopted to analyze the interview transcripts. In the first stage, analytical categories were formed by reading intensely, formulating and assembling detailed descriptions of the analytical categories into a guide for coding, focusing on the categories' variants and different aspects of evidence.

Then a coding guide with detailed instructions for coding the semi-structured interview transcripts was developed depending on the analytical categories. For instance, after an intensive and repeated reading of all transcripts, it was found that there were three types of the interviewees' perceptions of whether their university experience of learning English and MSRT preparation provided them with the skills needed to perform university tasks: yes, no, or neutral. Therefore, these three tendencies served as the guide based on which coders coded the interviewees' narratives on this topic.

After transcribing all of the interviews, an overall view of the distribution of frequencies of the analytical categories within the transcripts was presented. Furthermore, the researchers carried out thorough analyses of every interviewee's transcript to verify hypotheses, uncover new ones, or propose fresh theoretical perspectives. The unit of examination for the interview data was each student's complete response to every interview question. During the coding process of the interview data, only a single code was allotted to each answer, and the codes aligned with each research question.

Results

To address the research inquiry, a qualitative approach is employed, which entails examining the interview information by means of coding and grouping. Responses of the participants to the open-ended questions in the survey and interview guide concerning the changes needed for the MSRT to be more useful for university English learning. The feedback received from the open-ended questions in the survey and interview guide centered on the participants' suggestions for enhancing the MSRT's usefulness in the context of English language learning at the university level. They provided recommendations and proposed modifications that they believed would improve the MSRT's effectiveness in facilitating university-level English learning, and were asked to provide specific comments to support their reasoning. The analysis for the open-ended survey question, among the 150 participants who filled out the questionnaire, revealed that the six most prevalent present concordances (above 50 percent frequency) in research participants' suggestions could be divided into two groups:
- First group: to present mandatory MSRT speaking subtest, and
- Second Group: to narrow the gap between MSRT-bridged English education in terms of teaching, learning and assessment (see Table 3).

Table 3.
Concordance Frequencies of Survey Question No. 36 (Top 6 Categories Above 50%).

Concordance	Frequency	First Group	Second Group
adding speaking test	95%	X	
gap between MSRT technical manual and	92%		X

Concordance	Frequency	First Group	Second Group
university requirements in English language			
Unified MSRT. educational system, and university English curriculum standards	87%		X
weak English listening and speaking skills	76%	X	
English for academic purposes	73%		X
slower change in the expected level of English at university	51%		X

Most participants, as evidenced by both the survey and interview responses, recommended that a mandatory speaking subtest be incorporated into the MSRT exam. The students' comments suggested that individual efforts alone were insufficient in improving postgraduate students' English-speaking skills during higher education, underscoring the need for such a subtest. Thus, they expressed their endorsement of including an oral component in the MSRT exam. Many participants highlighted that administrators, English teachers, professors, and students alike believed that prior experience in English education and MSRT preparation should contribute to improving their English-speaking skills during postgraduate studies, but the current state of the MSRT was not deemed useful in addressing this issue.

Nonetheless, incorporating a mandatory speaking subtest in the MSRT exam on a nationwide scale proved to be a formidable challenge due to the varying priorities and disparities among different majors in the Iranian context. Consequently, they endeavored to enhance the English-speaking skills of the students by other means. As per the students' perspectives, the English-speaking proficiency of postgraduate students cannot be adequately improved solely through the individual efforts of stakeholders during higher education stages. Therefore, they strongly advocate for the inclusion of an oral section in the MSRT exam.

In terms of the MSRT test purposes, from 30 interviewees, 21 of them believed that the test filters university graduates in the higher educational levels and make them for the future jobs or even the immigration. The rest of the interviewees mentioned to the assessment of language proficiency as the second goal and they believed that the other purpose of tests like MSRT is to evaluate the English language proficiency of non-native speakers. This includes assessing their abilities in listening, reading, and writing. The goal is to provide an objective measure of an individual's language skills, often for academic or professional purposes.

The significant washback effect of the test on how individuals handle university workload was the other question of the interview. Of 30 MSRT candidates, all of them mentioned to the code of language skill enhancement and time management. For the former, the interviewees believed that as individuals prepare for the test, they naturally enhance their language proficiency in these areas. This improved language proficiency can directly benefit them in understanding lectures, reading academic materials, participating in class discussions, and expressing themselves in written assignments—all essential components of handling university workload. For the latter, (time management), the interviewees stated that as the test is a timed test, and test-takers must manage their time effectively to complete each section within the allotted timeframe. This emphasis on time management can translate into improved efficiency in handling university workload, as individuals become more adept at allocating their time to different tasks, such as studying, attending classes, and completing assignments.

The washback effect of the test on university English learning was the other question of the interview that the participants mentioned to some effects. The first one was the ability to comprehend complex materials, write academic essays, and engage in scholarly discourse during English courses at university. The second effect reported by 21 candidates out of 30 was communicative competence improvement. Improved communication skills acquired during MSRT preparation contribute to better participation in

class discussions, effective presentation of ideas, and successful communication in academic and social contexts within the university setting.

The washback effect of the MSRT test on candidates' worries in university English learning can manifest in various ways, as reported by the interviewees. The first was test anxiety reduction, reported by 17 out of 30 candidates. Candidates who have prepared for the test and performed well may experience a reduction in test anxiety. They believed that successful MSRT preparation builds confidence in English language skills. Candidates who have faced and overcome the challenges of the test may worry less about language proficiency in university, leading to a more positive and relaxed approach to their English learning. The second code (reported by 13 out of 30 candidates) was adaptation to academic rigor, which means candidates may initially worry about adapting to the academic rigor of university studies conducted in English. MSRT, with its focus on academic English, serves as a preparation ground for the linguistic demands of university coursework. Candidates who have undergone test preparation may find the transition to university English learning less daunting, alleviating concerns about understanding complex materials, writing academic essays, and participating in advanced academic discussions.

Last but not least, there were two illustrative codes representing the washback effect of the MSRT test on university English learning activities and test preparation strategies. Integration of academic skills which means following test preparation, candidates may naturally integrate the academic skills honed during the test into their university English learning activities. The specific focus on academic language proficiency in MSRT, such as critical reading can seamlessly transfer to university coursework. Students may engage in reading academic texts with a heightened awareness and proficiency in this skill. Furthermore, again the code of effective time management was reported by 14 candidates. MSRT's timed nature encourages candidates to develop effective time management strategies during preparation. Candidates who have successfully navigated the time constraints of MSRT may bring improved time management skills to their university English learning activities.

This could involve efficiently handling reading assignments, managing tasks within deadlines, and allocating time effectively for language-related studies.

Lastly, as per the survey and interview responses, the participants believe that the MSRT listening subtest should be included in all exams to improve students' English listening skills. All stakeholders considered the potential benefits of enhancing students' listening abilities and promoting English language learning and teaching in the university setting. This, in turn, would assist students in managing their academic workload and improving their English proficiency.

Another concern raised by the participants was the need to align the MSRT technical manual with the English language teaching, learning, and assessment requirements of universities. The separation between the test and previous English education in terms of curriculum standards and high-stakes test requirements posed significant challenges to their English language learning at the university level. They hoped guide gradual, smooth and coherent alteration could be applied from easy to difficult based on university English curricula and tests. As the participant described in her interview,

> *I wish that the requirements of MSRT and university English courses on our English skills could provide a shorter continuum, which would suggest the students a smoother transition from easier tasks to more difficult tasks in postgraduate studies. Especially, it would be nice if the MSRT technical manual could reach students' English abilities for academic purposes, which would be of great significance to students' university English learning.*

Alternatively, another participant mentioned the following with regard to English reading,

> *The reading materials in the MSRT were mostly adapted from newspapers or introductory sections of books on general subject, while in university, we are usually asked to study or read the articles and texts of an academic nature. There appears to be a mismatch since even though the MSRT preparation enhanced my English reading*

ability, it did not prepare me well for what the university asks for in English education.

Some interviewees were ill-equipped to handle the English reading tasks required at the university level, such as reading academic papers and technical reports, despite having prepared for the MSRT. However, a few interviewees noted that their MSRT preparation had contributed to improving their English reading skills. As a result, they demonstrated their wish to enhance English education by making it easier for them to learn the language from basic to advanced levels. In summary, the participants offered that a speaking subtest to MSRT as a non-optional choice would produce positive washback in teaching and learning in all university majors. Moreover, they asked for communication of stakeholders with real examinees in higher education programs to create unified teaching, learning and assessment standards that coordinate English learning.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to provide a thorough comprehension of the perspectives of Iranian PhD students regarding the impact of the MSRT module implementation on English language learning, and the modifications required for this countrywide examination. The analysis of qualitative data gathered from surveys and semi-structured interviews uncovered both positive and negative effects of the MSRT on English language testing. Overall, PhD candidates had a positive view of the MSRT, as they believed it helped with English language learning at the university. Candidates' reactions to the items of the interview data indicated that the instruction they received during MSRT preparation enhanced their English reading and writing skills (positive washback effects) more than their listening and speaking skills (negative washback effects).

Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) found agreement among previous research studies that the impact of a test's washback effects varies in terms of types and levels among different groups of students. The characteristics of a test can influence the way it affects subsequent behavior (washback), potentially leading to varying perceptions of this effect among different groups. In line with previous findings, this study also concludes that MSRT (a type of test) is not effective in helping students acquire adequate English-speaking skills as per the university's standards, despite receiving generally positive feedback. The focus of MSRT preparation appears to be more on improving listening, reading, and writing skills.

The results of the current study and those of Qi (2004) suggest that it may be worthwhile to consider adding a mandatory speaking subtest to the MSRT based on feedback from the participants. If a speaking subtest were added as a mandatory component of the MSRT, it could lead to a notable washback effect, thereby significantly enhancing the English learning experience for students in postgraduate programs. In addition, it would establish a robust basis for students' ability to speak English and other competencies, thereby forming a sturdy starting point for their future postgraduate studies. It would also expand the before-test MSRT washback to support English learning and expedite development towards the goal of students being able to fully manage university workloads.

Shih's (2006, 2007) resulted that extrinsic, intrinsic and test factors might all be at work in affecting English learning within the washback mechanism. In accordance with Shih's (2006, 2007) list of factors, the present study teased out the one major predictor (i.e., postgraduate program) that had exerted significant effects on students' insights. Policymakers should examine these traits while developing strategies that would result in more supportive and enduring positive effects on university-level English education in diverse cultural settings. In the current study, a number of participants suggested that the MSRT could facilitate the process of learning English by bridging the disparity between the academic tasks and the teaching, learning, and assessment criteria in university settings. Although bringing about positive MSRT washback to facilitate students' university English learning is not one of the two officially enacted MSRT test objectives, it would be a valuable revision.

The Ministry of Education's goal to enhance the integration of the speaking component into the MSRT is a commendable initiative among the

potential future measures for restructuring the MSRT. This suggestion aligns with a study conducted by Zhang (2019) in the Chinese context on a similar national test of English in that the results implied the implementation of speaking and listening tasks to enhance the quality of the English test standards.

In conclusion, it can be stated that incorporating English education that covers all the essential skills - listening, speaking, reading, and writing - into MSRT would contribute to the exam's credibility. Since the TLU domains of college-level English instruction typically require students to demonstrate proficiency in all language skills during academic lectures and presentations, it would be in line with these expectations to prioritize such a comprehensive approach. Meanwhile, the participants in the current research argue that the discontinuity between MSRT's English education and the rigor of university coursework obstructs MSRT's ability to have a positive and significant impact on university students' English language learning outcomes. The reason behind this could be the disconnection between university English requirements and the MSRT technical manual. The claim presented by the candidates seems reasonable provided that the basic level of requirements in the universities' English teaching guide normally asks students to be involved with academic discourses and activities through the use of their four English skills. Based on a graduated system and unified criteria of English proficiency through the use of one common terminology and interpretation, the MSRT intended to simplify English education concerning curricular and assessment requirements. Moreover, the MSRT could serve as a theoretical foundation for improving itself through producing the intended washback. To achieve a comprehensive and cohesive approach, it is possible to improve the National English Testing System in Iran with scientific, practical, and feasible measures, thereby integrating the MSRT and other significant English exams.

Conclusion

The participants' open-ended responses to questions and semi-structured interviews yielded qualitative data, which revealed their recommendations for enhancing the usefulness of MSRT module implementation in English learning for Iranian PhD candidates. According to the study question, the participants suggested that the inclusion of a speaking subtest could have a beneficial impact on MSRT's non-optional status as a teaching and learning tool across all university disciplines. In addition, they asked for stakeholder communication with real test-takers in higher education programs to create unified learning, teaching and assessment standards that coordinate English learning.

The current research yields various findings. Primarily, as per the feedback provided by the students, there was a lack of synchronization between the exam material and the university's academic load. Consequently, even though the MSRT was anticipated to equip students with the necessary skills to handle university workloads, some obstacles and hurdles were faced by the candidates. Furthermore, the suggestions put forth by the students to enhance positive emotions and make use of the MSRT were perceptive. Hence, to facilitate the learning of English in universities, the test should be modified further by incorporating a new objective to provide beneficial washback. The students regarded the inclusion of a speaking component in the test as essential, which would prompt them to take this aspect more seriously. In reality, it helps students do better in their university classes by improving their skills in presenting and participating in activities. Additionally, this will contribute to their overall enhancement in the English language. Ultimately, the student's attitude towards the MSRT test and learning English can be positively influenced by the connection and coherence of these objectives, which can be adjusted based on their workload at the university.

This article offers some suggestions for educators, test creators, stakeholders, policymakers, and program developers in the education sector to enhance the effectiveness and applicability of tests that are in line with their intended purposes. It also aims to assist PhD candidates in various higher education environments in comprehending the strengths and weaknesses of both the test and their English

language learning approach. The results of this study can broaden the understanding of future researchers in the same field. A more extensive examination of the MSRT material may offer inclusive recommendations based on candidates' perceptions of how to enhance the test's quality. Furthermore, program developers and teacher educators can offer educational programs on effective learning methods that not only meet academic standards but also help students excel in English language proficiency and tests.

While this study had certain drawbacks like not taking into account the English proficiency of students as a significant factor in shaping their perception of the MSRT test and focusing only on the context of Iran, other researchers who are interested can reproduce the study by including the candidates' overall English proficiency level and investigating its impact on the washback of nationwide tests like MSRT. Consequently, there is a need for extensive nationwide assessments that involve university English teachers, administrators, test developers, policymakers, and employers to evaluate their perspective on the enduring washback consequences of the MSRT. Further research investigations could be conducted and juxtaposed with the current findings to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the MSRT washback mechanism in the Persian context. Despite all of the support for possible alteration in the MSRT test, longitudinal empirical studies in the future will be helpful to closely track the washback effects of the MSRT reform measures.

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Appendix
Interview Guide: The MSRT Test Washback on English Learning
(Adopted from Zhang & Bournot-Trites, 2021)

1. About MSRT purposes
    —Does the MSRT do a good job serving a gate-keeping/selection function?
    —Does the MSRT do a good job bringing changes from focusing on formal linguistic Knowledge to practice and use of the language to university English learning?
    —What are the influences of the MSRT on university English learning?
2. About MSRT washback on handling university workload
    —What are the formal/informal uses of English in your university education?
    —Does your university English learning and/or MSRT preparation provide you with the skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) you need?
    —What explains your (in) adequate English language proficiency?
    —What are your strengths and weaknesses among your English abilities (reading, writing,
    speaking, and listening)? Are your English language skills high enough now to handle the university workload?
    —Do you think that your university English learning and MSRT preparation experiences had anything to do with your (in) adequate English language proficiency?
    —Should university English education and/or MSRT preparation fully prepare students to handle the university workload?
3. About MSRT washback on attitude toward and reason(s) for university English learning
    —What are your attitudes toward and reason(s) for learning English in university?
    —Are there any changes from those in university/ MSRT preparation? What are the changes, if any?
    —What explains the changes, if any? Do you think that your university English learning and MSRT preparation experiences had anything to do with the (no) changes?
4. About MSRT washback on worries in university English learning
    —Do/Did you worry about university English learning and/or taking the MSRT? If yes, what worries/worried you?
    —What explains your (no) worries? Do you think that your university English learning and/or your MSRT preparation experiences had anything to do with your (no) worries?
5. About MSRT washback on university English learning activities and test preparation strategies —What are/were your major university English learning activities and MSRT preparation strategies? How useful do you believe they are/were?
    —Why do/did you do so?
    —What proportion of your university English learning and MSRT preparation time is/was spent working on the different skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking)?
    —Are there any changes from those in your university English learning and MSRT preparation?
    What are the changes, if any?
    —What explains the changes, if any? Do you think that your MSRT preparation experiences had anything to do with the changes?
6. About changes needed for MSRT to be more useful for university English learning
    —What changes are needed for the MSRT to be more useful for university English learning? Why do you think so? Please specify and comment