

The Washback Effects of Testing on the Pedagogical Practices at the Secondary English Classes in Dhaka, Bangladesh



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Classes in Dhaka, Bangladesh**

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

I hereby declare that this thesis is the student's own work and effort. All sources of information incorporated here have been duly acknowledged. This thesis has been submitted with my approval.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Abdullah".

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DECLARATION

This thesis is a presentation of my original research work. Wherever contributions of others are involved, every effort is made to indicate this clearly, with due reference to the literature, and acknowledgement of collaborative research and discussions.

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Dedication

To my dearest parents

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to thank the Almighty Allah. Then I would like to thank myself for putting in all the hard work to make things possible that seemed impossible. Then I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Abdullah Al Mahmud Sir for giving me the opportunity to work under his supervision and guiding me throughout this challenging journey. Lastly, I would like to thank all the other teachers and related individuals who helped me whenever I need their support and guidance.

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ABSTRACT

The pedagogical practices are often grappled with the negative washback effects due to reasons such as lack of incongruence between curricular objects and classroom activities, lack of assessment literacy, negative attitude towards the test, the discrepancy between the communicative-language based method and the actual classroom practices. The researchers urge the teacher to be the active agent and revamp the domain of assessment to foster more positive and less negative washback. This study aims at exploring the washback effects of testing on the teaching and learning at the secondary English classes. The study focuses on the secondary level because it is deemed as a transitional stage between school and college and encompasses key and formative years of the students' education. The primary objective of this study, henceforth, is to examine the negative or positive washback effects of testing and assessment on teaching and learning processes at the secondary-school level in Bangladesh. This research carried out a qualitative study to explore why and to what extent the washback effects impact the pedagogical settings. In doing so, systematic thematic analysis and coding was used to find out the emerging themes and interpret the collected data.

Keywords: Assessment, Pedagogical practices, Secondary-school, Testing, Washback effects

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background of the study

High-stakes testing has been in practice in Bangladesh for many years. Even though the format of the tests has been modified thoroughly over the years, the high-stake testing system still prevails. There are mainly 4 high stakes tests or public examinations, which are Primary Education Completion (PEC), Junior School Certificate (JSC), Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC). Recently the authority has scrapped the first two due to its misalignment with the newly formed education policy. Secondary school level is regarded as the biggest and most prioritized area in the educational landscape of Bangladesh (Begum and Farooqui, 2008). Students sit for a high-stake examination, i.e. Secondary School Certificate (SSC) or equivalent examination at the end of class 10. At this level, they study English as a mandatory subject for two years. The existing education system of Bangladesh can be broadly categorized into 4-tiers:

- Elementary education (Class I- V)
- Secondary education (Class VI-X)
- Higher secondary Education (Class XI, XII)
- Tertiary education (From undergraduate level onwards)

At this stage, the students go through extensive preparation for the SSC examination. It is widely recognized that such testing and assessment induce considerable pressure and thus washback effect is predominantly observed in the arc of society and education including the test takers and test whereas "tests should serve as a nexus to connect classroom based instruction practices and work in tandem" (Adair-Hauck et al., 2006: 365). That brings the underlying problem embedded

in the pedagogical context of Bangladesh. Recently, washback effects of testing have been widely researched in the context of Bangladesh, still it is inadequate comparing the amount of washback studies conducted on various counts all over the world. Therefore, this study was designed to demonstrate the nature of washback effects on English language teaching and learning at the secondary-school level. The study examined whether any positive or negative washback exists at the secondary level, in what way and to what extent teaching and learning is influenced by the high-stake testing system.

Problem Statement

Assessment plays a crucial role in the pedagogical setting regardless of the region. However, it is often more or less tacitly understood that the main purpose of any assessment is to improve the students' learning (Rogier, 2014). Therefore, it is of paramount importance to employ a reliable and valid English language testing system. When this high-stake language assessment influences the teachers, students, parents and the overall program, it is known as "washback" in English Language Teaching (ELT). Several studies around the world have revealed that teaching and testing since their inception are closely associated with one another. Testing is used to improve the students' learning and it should reflect the teaching practices and the course objectives. However, teaching and learning are overwhelmingly examination-oriented in Bangladesh (Rahman et al., 2021).

The classroom activities and tasks reflect the linguistics items that are commonly tested in the examination. Even though all four skills both the receptive and the productive skills, are equally important for the students to be communicatively competent, the teachers give more focus on reading and writing skills and the other two skills (listening and speaking) receive little or no attention even though these two skills are also integrated in the curriculum. It clearly shows

that there is an inclination of narrowing down the curriculum to test items and "teaching to the test" and "teaching for the test" (Ramezaney, 2010, p.1509) rather than focusing on bridging the gap between classroom and real-life. This selective attitude is detrimental to the overall learning process as many tasks, activities, subskills and skills are overlooked just because they focus more on scoring high in the test. This tendency gradually leads to the grade obsession of the students, teachers, parents and other stakeholders and the students go through extreme amounts of psychological pressure running after good grades. That begs the question about the possible washback that the testing system might have on the related bodies.

Besides, there exists an incongruence between the curriculum objectives and testing objectives and partial learning of the language is the outcome of the scenario (Amin & Greenwood, 2018). Due to the incongruence between and among the curriculum objectives, the classroom practices and the assessment system, negative washback on test takers and test givers is predominantly observed. It, therefore, needs to be addressed properly through reformation of the assessment system and manipulation of high-stake tests to foster positive washback so that the students can be better supported.

Furthermore, it is also known to the domain of ELT that in spite of plenty of research conducted with regards to the testing systems of different countries, when it comes to the ground reality of reformation is not as rosy as it appears (Alderson 2017; Cheng and Curtis 2010). In Asia, various aspects of the examination system have been studied, reported and criticized (Kwon et al. 2017; Qi 2007; Qian and Cumming 2017); however, it is still an under researched area in Bangladesh. Despite having many similarities with countries, it is considerably different from many perspectives such as culture, history, education and economic power. Against the backdrop of this fact, it is imperative to take into account the specificities and contextual nuances

of a region while conducting research to expand the radius of knowledge of ELT. This study investigates how all these factors positively or negatively impact the pedagogical setting that leave far-reaching and grave consequences for the learners.

Objectives of the study

The study aims to explore the washback effects encountered by students at the secondary level and also the reasons for facing the washback effects. The stakeholders including the teachers and students will be better supported and benefitted from the finding of this research by being aware of different assessment practices and its washback. Finding how the washback effects impact the pedagogical practices at the secondary level may yield crucial findings to aid the stakeholders to support the teachers and students of this stage. It also suggests possible solutions to deal with negative washback. Keeping this in mind, this paper focuses on answering the following research questions which will guide the study:

1. How do testing and assessment impact the teaching and learning process at the secondary school-level in Bangladesh?
2. Why do the students face washback effects?
3. Why and to what extent testing and assessment positively or negatively impacts the pedagogical practices?

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, the existing literature on washback effects of testing on pedagogical practices at the secondary school of Bangladesh has been reviewed.

Rahman et al. (2021) conducted qualitative research in the context of Bangladesh on 12 teachers and 108 students from 12 secondary schools. The data was collected using a convenient sampling procedure and purposive technique. In this study, the researchers found out that negative washback, which mainly springs from areas such as teaching-learning styles, teaching methods and classroom practices, is highly rampant at this stage of education. According to their findings, the negative effects stem from the lack of assessment literacy, the discrepancy between the curricular objectives and the testing formats, the stakes of the tests, the participants' attitude towards the tests and the grade obsession of the parents and students. When all these factors lead the students to be more examination-centric, other learning activities involving listening and speaking skills, usually take a back seat as there is no provision of testing such skills in the external examinations like Secondary School Certificate (SSC). This study clearly provides insights into the fact that there is an incongruence between what is claimed in the communicative competency-based curriculum and what is implemented in the classrooms (Rahman et al., 2021).

Pizarro (2010) sheds light on the backwash effect of high-stake English Test (ET) on the teaching practices conducting a qualitative/quantitative study on 51 secondary school teachers in the context of Spain. His study reveals that the teaching contents and classroom activities "to a large part adapted and geared in the direction of the test" (Pizarro, 2010, p.163). Consequently, the teachers tend to overlook the featured items, such as oral-based tasks and activities, in the materials that are untested in the main tests. It induces a long-term adverse impact on the

students' communicative competence. The washback effects also affect teachers' methodology in tandem as they cannot take full advantage of expertise related to testing and assessment.

Razavipour et al. (2011) conducted a study in the context of Iran on 53 EFL secondary school teachers which shows the state of assessment literacy which is deemed as one of the vital factors when it comes to the washback effects. The finding of the study reveals that teachers possess "a poor knowledge base" (Razavipour et al., 2011, p. 156) in assessment. More than one third of the teachers were unable to identify the correct definition of reliability, one of the cornerstones in testing that makes a test solid, even in multiple choice question (MCQ) formats. Besides, the extent to which they are assessment literate does not yield any fruitful results as they end up tailoring their assessment practices due to the demands of both internal and external standardized tests. As a result, it deteriorates the teachers' assessment competence in the long run. This research puts forward the need to focus on communication-based testing rather than discrete-point final examinations and overhaul this domain through pre-service and in-service training on a large scale.

Sukyadi and Mardiani (2011) carried out a qualitative study in the context of Indonesia on three secondary schools. This study reveals mixed perception about the existence of National Examination (NE) that entails both positive and negative washback in the arc of teaching methods, approaches, materials, assessments and students' attitude towards testing. They also argue that this examination negatively impacts the students' learning in the classroom settings as the teacher shifts their focus to practice tests, test-taking strategies, "teaching to the test" and materials that are delineated in the national curriculum. It is deemed as an unintended negative washback. However, the study found that high-level achievers mostly have more positive washback than their moderate-level achiever cohorts whereas the low-level achiever has the most

negative washback (Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011). The teachers and other stakeholders associated with the school attempt to maintain or surpass the previous achievements by arranging more "test-like" model tests and mock tests that also add extra burden of examinations for the students.

Jamila and Kabir (2020) conducted a qualitative study in the context of Bangladesh through classroom observation and teacher interview. In this study, they examine the backwash effect of Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination. The teachers' classroom tasks and activities do not necessarily reflect the curricular objectives; rather it is highly tailored to commonly-set linguistics items as the tests are mostly predictive and therefore teachers and students can anticipate the test items that also question the validity of the tests. This noticeable occurrence illustrates the strong inclination of teachers towards "teaching to the test" that leaves a detrimental impact on both teachers and students as it emboldens teachers to narrow down their range of teaching activities, teach only the selected items that is most relevant to the public examinations as obtaining good grades is a matter of great concern for teachers, students and parents (Jamila & Kabir, 2020). They also argue that due to the use of these test results in college admission, university entry test and other professional purposes, the washback effect has become "a distinctive educational phenomenon" (Jamila & Kabir, 2020, p. 558) and a part of the vicious cycle.

Sultana (2018) conducted a qualitative study in the context of Bangladesh where she demonstrates how the testing at the secondary level fails to measure the proficiency level of the students and fails to correspond with their communicative learning needs in tandem despite having an increasing percentage of passing rate. Moreover, the students tend to focus more on rote memorization rather than communication skills, which indicates the lack of content validity

of the tests (Sultana, 2018). Aside from this, even the highest scorers fail to produce the language in spite of having good grades in the exams. It raises questions about the inflated test scores and also the reliability of the test. They argue that this existing test format reveals the misalignment with the curriculum prescribed/ embedded in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Sultana, 2018). There prevails a mismatch that has been produced by the explicit test-drive teaching culture, that is not the main purpose of the high-stake test. Besides, the researcher posits that the tests have content validity too. As a result, it leads to negative washback even though inducing positive washback is highly expected in CLT.

Ramezaney (2017) carried out a quantitative study on 365 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in the context of Iran. In this study, they examined the overt washback effect of the gate-keeping University Entrance Examination (UEE) on the teachers' curriculum planning and instruction techniques. The study revealed that the pre-university and high school teachers use UEE test items in their classroom teachings as per the demands of the students despite being aware of the negative washback. The test items that turn up and carry more weight in the UEE test receive more emphasis in the classroom. As a result, grammatical items and vocabulary receive much attention whereas speaking, listening and pronunciation, interactional activities, group work receive the least attention. Even though "a high level of curriculum alignment" (Ramezaney, 2017, p. 1517) is observed, it is one of the areas that shows the derailment from the curriculum. Consequently, it brings about less positive washback on the teachers and test takers due to focusing more on the lower order skills.

Moradi (2019) adopted a mixed-method approach to conduct the study on 35 professors and 200 students in the context of Iran. Firstly, a pilot study was conducted and then the data was collected through questionnaires, structural interviews and observation schemes. This study was

conducted to examine whether the centralized examinations have any positive or negative effects and to what extent. It also investigated the factors that lead to washback effects on the teaching and learning practices. This study finds the existence of both positive and negative washback. Negative washback surfaces when the professors attempt to teach following the prescribed test format and even try to modify their teaching methods to adapt with the final exams. The tendency of promoting test-taking skills and strategies is also observed in the study. When it comes to the positive washback, it emerges as the professors link the classroom practices with the courses' objectives and learning outcomes rather than paying more attention to the objectives of the final exams (Moradi, 2019). This alignment brings about positive washback in teaching and learning for both teachers and learners. Furthermore, the endorsement and encouragement of the professors to learn, use of effective learning strategies and use of authentic materials in class create a positive attitude towards tests for the students which again create a positive backwash effect.

Liu and Chen (2022) conducted a study employing a mixed-method approach in the context of China to investigate the washback effects of the Oral English Sampling Test on English teaching. According to this study, the sampling test has both negative and positive washback effects on the teachers' and students' teaching and learning practices, attitudes and behaviors. The test exerts some sort of negative effect on the teachers' psychology due to which they tend to have the tendency of teaching to the test (Liu & Chen, 2022). Apart from that, negative washback emerges as the students tend to study just to obtain good grades or just to pass the test where learning takes a subordinate role and students' learning motivation decreases. On the other hand, adoption of the test made the class more student-oriented and accelerated a more communicative teaching method to improve their communicative competence

and performance. It encourages the students to treat oral English as equally as reading or writing skill. They also argue that the teachers should not overemphasize the test on the grounds that it might lead the learners to "learn for the test". Furthermore, the teachers are expected to incorporate new teaching tasks and activities in the teaching process to have more positive washback.

Şenel and Tutunis (2011) conducted a mixed-method study on 42 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students at the tertiary level in the context of turkey. This study examined the negative effects of scheduled and time-bound writing examinations on the EFL students. This study found that when the student knows that an item is being tested as a part of the assessment, their test anxiety and stress-level increases and their performance on the test suffers. This language anxiety is defined as "distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings and behaviors" (Şenel & Tutunis, 2011, p. 49) associated with language learning in the classroom setting. This language anxiety springs from factors such as their fear of failure, fear of limited linguistics knowledge, fear of performing badly in regard to peers, negative correlation with the language test, test anxiety. These determinants decrease the reliability and validity of the test to a great extent by having a profound impact on the students' performance. As a result, these factors affect the students' psychological well-being which in turn have negative washback on them.

Pan (2009) conducted a qualitative study on washback effects and its implications in the landscape of teaching and learning. By reviewing various definitions of washback, the researcher puts forth her own view on washback. Furthermore, this research deals with washback and similar concept terms, different types of washback and also the pedagogical implications for EFL teachers. She argues that the teachers' role and beliefs play a key role in inducing a positive or negative washback. Therefore, they are the ones who should connect between what is taught and

what is tested and teach the communicative aspects of language through authentic materials rather than teaching discrete points of language to reduce the negative washback. An in-depth change is required that can be brought through in-service training, peer observations and not inhibiting students' learning motivation (Pan, 2009). It is understandable that teachers may have limited power to influence high-stakes tests and its curriculum; however, they possess the incredible power to stimulate students to learn with necessary scaffolding instead of teaching to the test or teaching for the test (Pan, 2009).

Khattak et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study on 50 students in the context of Pakistan. The study demonstrates that even though the learners need to be tested for all four skills (productive and receptive skills), speaking and listening skills receive the secondary preferences that result in partial language learning. The reading and writing skills focus on the lower order skills, i.e. knowledge and application, that encourage rote-learning. It acts as an impediment in meaningful language learning. Hence, it has a negative washback on the linguistic aptitude of the students (Khattak et al., 2022). Even though many respondents argue that the PEC exam improves their English language skills. However, their inability to make use of these skills in the real-life context acts as evidence to the limitations of the examination. Some of them opined that it bears a negative washback on the students due to taking place at such a tender age and requiring extensive preparation. The researchers are of the opinion that the English language tests need to be revised extensively and optimum emphasis should be given to comprehension-based skills, analytical aptitude, pragmatic competence, listening and speaking skills (Khattak et al., 2022).

Kutlu et al. (2020) carried out qualitative research on 42 students in the context of Turkey. It throws light on the students' attitudes towards Foreign Language Test. The findings of

this study reveals the factors that negatively impact the students' attitudes towards the test. Therefore, the students possess negative attitudes towards it. Preparing for the exam (rigorous linguistics rules and advanced vocabulary) is a time-consuming and stressful process for the students and therefore it becomes difficult for the students to allocate time for other courses. As the students believe that they will not have to use the test items in real-life situations, it turns out to be a discouraging issue for them to study for it. As a result, it leads to serious negative washback effects. Therefore, this study puts forward the need for improvement in terms of content, test-type, reliability and validity of the test to have more positive effects on the students. In light of the findings of this study, it can be deduced that the test has more negative effects than positive effects that demonstrates the necessity to modify the test comprehensively to develop the students' language skills in a better way.

Roghmal (2019) adopted a qualitative study to conduct his qualitative studies in the context of Afghanistan. The researcher exclusively placed focus on how washback impacts the students' learning attitude examining the key factors that influence it. He argues that teachers can play the part of a change agent in promoting positive washback and he also draws implication for the teachers in the pedagogical settings. The study reveals that major factors in washback include contextual factors, assessment factors and factors related to the teachers (Roghmal, 2019). The teachers can foster positive washback both at micro and macro levels by aligning the classroom teaching with the test items and by changing the assessment process as students tend to have more positive perception towards testing if the teaching and testing as well as the educational goals and assessments correspond with one another (Roghmal, 2019). He also argues that by making the test multi-faceted and wide enough to cover all the dimensions of the teaching contents can be another way to foster positive washback.

The studies I have reviewed so far, explores the washback effects, its reasons, the factors that affect it and its pedagogical implications. The previous studies reveal that the misalignment between curriculum and testing system, lack of teachers' assessment literacy, dependency on coaching centers, and negative correlation between students and testing system are some of the predominant reasons for the students to experience negative washback. The researchers demonstrated how the negative washback can act as hurdles to the students' academic performance and mental wellbeing. They also suggest a number of possible ways to produce more positive washback so that effective language learning can take place in a meaningful context. The researcher decided to work on this topic with a view to exploring to what extent the washback effect impacts the teaching-learning process. Since there is a dearth of research on washback effects in the context of Bangladesh, this study will add value to the domain of pedagogy as the teachers, students, parents, policymakers and all the other stakeholders will ponder on the washback effects encountered by teachers and students and support and make necessary provision for them accordingly.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This study attempts to examine the washback effects of testing on the students at the secondary stage. It concentrates on the existing testing practices of secondary school level, the reasons for positive or negative washback and how these washback effects hinder or foster the teaching and learning process. This study was conducted adopting a qualitative research approach to "explore, explain, or describe the phenomenon of interest (Marshall & Rossman, 1999, p. 33) as it can explain the washback effects of assessment more effectively than quantitative study methods (Watanabe, 2004). Six students from a secondary school were recruited for the study. The particular school was selected on the basis of convenience and purposiveness. There are around five thousand students studying in the selected school. However, students from class 10 were chosen as they are the ones who are comparatively more experienced and endure the preparation of a high stakes test called Secondary School Certificate (SSC). The students who gave their consent to participate in the study and are willing to share their learning practices and experiences were selected.

Research Site

In this study, convenience sampling and purposive sampling will be used to select six students from a secondary school, ensuring equal demographic representation of both male and female students. Convenient sampling was used since the researcher is professionally affiliated with the institution and thus had access to the school students. Therefore, this particular type of non-probability sampling was employed because of the accessibility of the participants and convenience to collect data (Cresswell, 2012). The school where the study was carried out is a private and Bangla medium school located in Dhaka, Bangladesh. It is one of the oldest and

largest private schools in Dhaka established in the 1950s. There are around five thousand students studying in the selected school whereas there are around two thousand students at the secondary level. The school is a co-educational institution offering education to both male and female students. There are students from diverse backgrounds, from Bangla version to English version and from lower class to higher class. For teaching their student cohorts, there are only 50 teachers, having a pupil-teacher ratio of 1:40 which is not well proportioned at all. The students sit for a public examination or high-stakes examination which can be categorized as an achievement test or progress test as it takes place at the end of class 10 and also at a scheduled time. It aims to measure what the students have achieved over the course of their 2 years of study. In order to prepare the students for this high-stakes test, the school arranges class tests, half-yearly examination, final examination, pretest and test examination. On top of all these examinations, the students also sit for 3 model tests or mock tests to cement their preparation for SSC even after passing the threshold of test examination which produces a washback effect to the core.

Participants

The students of class 10 from the focal school were chosen for the interview as they undergo the preparation of a high-stake test for two long years that might make them encounter washback effects. The students who were not willing to share their experiences and practices despite assuring their anonymity was excluded. The six students who were more confident and comfortable with sharing their learning practices and challenges under their contextual circumstances and wanted their voices to be heard and issued to be addressed by the stakeholders, were selected for a semi-structured interview. In this case, the study intends not to generalize the final outcomes to a larger population, but to study the chosen participants from

different socio-economic and socio-cultural backgrounds in a small-scale study (Cresswell, 2012).

The names (pseudonyms) of the participants are Radia Islam, Sabrina Akter, Nafisa Sanowar, Rafid Ahmed, Asif Rahman and Abu Saleh. All the participants are in class 10. Three of them are females and the other three are males. As the SSC examination is approaching, all of them are busy studying hard to achieve their expected grades. Even though their test examination is over, they are still busy with model tests both at their school and in different coaching centers.

Data Collection Procedures

At this stage of the study, the researcher draws on an in-depth and semi-structured interview to collect up-close data from the participants. Hadiyanto and Nuraini (2016) argue that "interview is the best way to collect the data because we as a researcher interview the participant to find out from them all the things that we cannot directly observe" (p. 5). About thirty-minute long semi-structured interviews covering 10 open-ended questions was designed to elicit the perspectives, opinions, experiences regarding assessment practices of the participants in a detailed manner. Due to the nature of open-ended questions, they were not strained by any predetermined scales. The interviewees were also asked some supplementary and relevant questions regarding their backgrounds which might yield crucial findings regarding the washback effects. As for the data recording protocol, the interviews were audio-recorded along with note taking, after seeking permission from the participants, so that accuracy can be maintained along the entire process. According to Haryanto et al. (2018) "recording was due to support the data in the interview section so that the results could be later transcribed" (p. 5). The transcribed version of the interview was used as the main data for the study.

Data Analysis

After collecting the entire set of data, qualitative coding, inductive data analysis, emergent design (initial plans for research might not be religiously followed) and thematic analysis was employed for data analysis. Haryanto et. al (2018) posits that "Qualitative coding is related to assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of data and is also useful to get back or retrieve specific data" (p. 5). In the first step, the non-numerical data received from the selected interviewees was scanned and scrutinized keeping the research questions in mind in order to gather thorough understanding into the washback effects. Based on the interview transcription, preliminary codes were identified. Subsequently, the most recurrent patterns or the themes were developed from the preliminary codes. Apart from qualitative coding, theme-based approach or thematic analysis was employed in the study for analyzing the data. Under this type of analysis, a number of themes were identified and grouped from the interview transcription and explicated depending on the participants' frequency of uttered words, phrases, expressions and sentences. Inductive data analysis from the bottom up was used to build patterns, categories and themes by sorting data into progressively more abstract units of information.

In this regard, the data was shared with the participants to check on the validation and reliability of the findings so that any potential bias and discrepancies between the participants' actual meanings and the researcher's personally held meaning about the washback effect can be avoided during the data analysis procedure. All required ethics approvals were obtained from the participants' and participating schools. In this case, names of the interviewees and the participating school were pseudonymized to keep their privacy intact.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

The study reveals that washback, mostly negative washback of Secondary School Certificates (SSC) English examination predominantly exists in the pedagogical settings of Bangladesh. The negative washback was mainly identified in terms of teaching techniques, methods, approaching, materials, teaching and learning styles and classroom practices. This negative washback on English learning stems from the participants' negative attitude towards the test, discrepancy between the curricular objectives and testing format, grade obsession, pressure from the guardians to achieve good grades in high stake tests and teachers' lack of understanding the curricular objectives.

English Test as High-stake Test

The findings of the study demonstrate that the learners consider English tests at the SSC level as high-stake tests. The data received from the interviewees show that the results of the tests are considered as an important parameter to evaluate the students and used as an important criteria to get into colleges. Consequently, it negatively impacts the English learning English teaching as well as learning practices and make the students to be test-centered. During the interview, one of the participants Rafid (Interview-1, L-11-12) commented,

We are too busy in mastering the test-taking techniques and strategies through practicing model tests in the classroom day in and day out. Getting good grades is in the vanguard of learning, where all the activities revolve around it in class 9 and 10. The pressure to meet the expectation of parents and teachers is paramount as its result is used in later stages of their lives.

Discrepancy between the Curriculum and the Testing Format

The study has revealed that mismatch between the objectives related to curriculum and English testing format of SSC is one of the key reasons to cause negative washback. The students sit for two high-stake English tests (English 1st paper and English 2nd paper) at the secondary school level. An in-depth analysis of the official papers of secondary-level English language curriculum and the English testing format of the SSC examination has helped to gain insights into these high-stake tests. The national curriculum of the year 2012 designed by the National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB) contains two main objectives of English teaching in class IX and X. The first objective is to make the students communicatively competent in both receptive skills (reading and listening) and productive skills (speaking and writing) whereas the second one is to help the students to utilize the obtained competence in real life settings in terms of communication with others inside and outside the classroom (NCTB, 2012). However, the current English tests cannot meet the curricular objectives.

Moreover, the test lacks construct validity. The analysis of both the test items and test formats of these English tests reveals that the test only contain the linguistic competence and three sub-competencies, i.e. textual competence, textual coherence, grammatical competence, whereas communicative competence require both linguistic competence and pragmatic competence. The high-stake focuses mainly on the forms. In many cases, it is also possible to answer test questions without having proper and full understanding of the meaning in the provided context. Besides, the test items give little or even no attention to pragmatic competence and there is no provision for testing speaking and listening skills in the public examination.

Teachers' Lack of Assessment Literacy

Teachers are the ones who design and develop question papers for internal and external examinations. Therefore, they must be acquainted with the language testing for the students. However, the accounts of the 5 out of 6 students show that their teachers do not possess sufficient knowledge about English testing. This lack of assessment literacy leads to negative washback in the students and eventually acts as hindrance to students' learning. Due to the lack of language assessment literacy, the teachers blindly follow the question format of SSC English examinations. The students' account and the analysis of the question paper reveal that the teachers fail to incorporate diversity in the testing system. As a result, the students' competency is limited to only the textual and grammatical competence. One of the interviewees, Sabrina, raised the issue and commented: "The teachers design exam question papers of monthly test, terminal examinations, pretest and test examinations matching the board examinations to make us better prepared" (Interview-1, L-62-63).

Students' Attitude Towards the Test

The study reveals that the students possess a negative attitude towards the English tests of SSC which led them to learn only for the tests. Their positive negative attitude towards the tests are directly related to positive or negative washback. In this study, the participants have mixed attitudes but they possess mainly a negative attitude towards the test and this negative attitude towards the test leads to negative washback. The students say that the current schooling system does not offer any counseling and advising to the students. The finding reveals that the participants' attitudes and perceptions are incongruous with the intended washback of the test. The study demonstrates that out of 6 participants, only 1 student considers the existing testing

system is appropriate for achieving the goal of the curriculum, i.e. communicative competence of the target language English.

Dependency on Parallel Coaching Centers and Guidebooks

One of the students, Nafsia, frankly says, “We study for the sake of getting grades and securing a good job” (Interview-1 , L-26-27). In order to obtain good grades, he also depends upon coaching centers and guidebooks apart from textbooks as there are many topics that are not possible to understand without taking help from guidebooks or coaching centers. Another participant pointed out the fact that it is not possible for the subject to explain everything in detail due to the fact that the class hour is only 40 minutes. Therefore, he attends after school coaching sessions of the same teacher who is the subject teacher of his school. All the other respondents also consulted either house tutors, coaching centers run by teachers or undergraduate-level students for better understanding of the subject contents and due to the pressure put on them by both teachers and guardians to secure good marks in internal and external examinations. These coaching centers and guide books mainly focus on only the items that commonly appear on the test and shortcuts tips, tricks, and test-taking strategies to make them ready to take the test through mock tests. Studying and learning from textbooks receives a back seat in this regard as not all the parts of textbooks, mainly which carry listening and speaking related tasks and activities, are equally important for the test and so they focus on only the parts which are important for the test. All the respondents acknowledge that keeping house tutors, attending coaching classes and studying commercial guide books seem to be taking a good portion of their money and energy leaving them “mentally and physically drained out” (Interview-1, L-38-39).

Washback Product

In a study related to washback, washback product indicates what is learnt. In this study, the main focus is the improvement of the communicative competence of the learners. However, the learning of the students can be understood from the classroom activities and practices and how they are evaluated in the classroom. The experiences shared by the learners provide insights into the activities in which students were involved. All the students share that they study solely for their grammatical competence instead of communicative competence. The only two skills that are highly focused on are reading and writing skills whereas listening and speaking receive little or even no attention at all as question papers of SSC English test are set based on the first two skills.

Teachers' Advice and its Repercussion on the Learners

The finding reveals that the teachers' advice also creates some sort of washback on the students' language learning. As the teachers' advice is mainly focused on the students' preparation for the test rather than developing their language skills, it produces negative washback. The students argue that the preferred chapters and topics of the teachers got prioritized in the classroom teaching. Moreover, the students admit that their teachers do not engage them in spoken English or any interactive language related activities. Rather they are taught how to develop test taking strategies so that they can achieve high scores in the SSC examination and create name and fame for their schools. The students also admit that the pressure to teach only for the test comes even from the headteacher of the school so that their school can rank high in terms of GPA-5.00. Thus, the study reveals how the teachers and the students (one of the factors of Hughes's trichotomy model of washback [1993] and the 3Ps of Saville (2009)), are negatively affected by the testing system.

CHAPTER 05: DISCUSSION

The Impact of Testing System on the Secondary English Curriculum and the Students

The national curriculum is planned to obtain extensive communicative competencies. The objectives of secondary school-level curriculum (National Curriculum 2012) are as follows:

- I. To make the students competent in both productive skills (speaking and writing) and receptive skills (listening and reading).
- II. To make the students use these skills for fruitful communication in different real-life situations

It proposes that students will be able to “describe people and places, follow instructions, directions, requests, announcements and responds accordingly in social situations”, that they will be able to “narrate incidents in logical situations, ask for and give permission/ suggestions, participate in conversations, discussions and debates”, and that they will also be able to “recognise and use English sounds, stress, and intonation appropriately while listening and speaking” (National Curriculum 2012). The textbooks have been designed based on a communicative approach that equally focuses on all the four skills. However, the experience shared by the students reveals that the teachers rarely use the textbooks. There might be two reasons behind this. They do not use the textbooks because they prioritize teaching only for the test or because they do not feel comfortable and confident about implementing the speaking and listening related tasks and activities in the classroom in an interactive way.

The current SSC English examination has only provision for testing reading and writing skill. The structure of the national examination only allows assessment of skills in reading, and writing which most often allows success through rote memorization of contents. The testing system does not evaluate whether the learners can improve their language skills in real-life

situations. As the curricular objectives set by the national curriculum are not tested in the SSC examinations, they are not paid attention by the teachers and students in the school.

Consequently, an abridged version of the textbook and constricted curriculum operates both in schools and coaching centers which put forward the test-driven mindset of the involved stakeholders. All the students admit how the teachers felt pressured by the guardians to teach to the test and the test items and structures were the driving force behind the operational classroom curriculum. Some students opine that the testing system needs to be modified if the congruence between the curriculum and classroom teaching is expected. Bringing a change overnight is not as easy as the students suggest. However, their comments show the widely held belief that the importance of what is tested outweighs that of what is required by the curriculum or assigned textbooks. There is clearly a misalignment between what is expected by the curriculum and what is practiced in the classroom.

Role of Coaching Centers and Commercial Guide on the Washback

The study demonstrates how detrimental it is when teaching and learning practices are solely based on what is expected in public examinations or examinable materials. The participants acknowledge that this test dependency refrains the teachers from teaching a richer curriculum and the students from learning going beyond the set academic-boundary and also puts pressure on the students as the tests require them to prepare extensively. Consequently, "a parallel education industry" (Amin & Greenwood, 2018, p. 15) including independent coaching centers, after-school coaching run by teachers and commercial guidebook publishers emerge that mainly focus on achieving good grades in the examinations that gravely limit the students' intellectual and academic curiosity as they disregard many tasks and activities that is a also part of the textbooks and crucial for their learning. This traditional examination system is so deeply

entrenched in the educational and societal landscape that clearly hints at the complexity of the reformation initiatives in future.

A Complex Problem

The qualitative study clearly reveals that it is impractical to achieve the curricular objective with the existing national testing system. It also reveals that it is “falsely optimistic to hope for substantive changes” (Amin & Greenwood, 2018) if the current testing system remains unchanged and if it is not made more harmonious with the curricular objectives and goals. From the experience of the students, it is also found out that the teachers are also caught in an intricate system in the same way other stakeholders such as students, parents are. Therefore, it would be an injustice if we put blame exclusively on teachers for teaching to the test rather than focusing on the communicative competence of the learners (Hasan 2013; Maniruzzaman and Hoque 2010).

As this testing system is in practice for several decades, it has become a crucial component in the educational landscape of Bangladesh. It possesses the power “to disrupt, and even block, government initiatives in curriculum change” (Amin and Greenwood, 2018). The testing system possesses power as it is not just only a tool for testing but also acts as an apparatus for social construction that favors the unequal distribution of money and power. As a testing tool, it can probably be easy to modify. However, it is sustained by the direct or indirect parental expectation to keep it as it is. The parents who can afford to send their children to established schools and pay for private tuitions can hold a logical expectation that their children can secure the highly coveted GPA 5.00 in the SSC examination. Those parents who want to uplift the socio-economic condition of their children spend their hard-earned money to pay for private tutor, school tuition fees and coaching centers. The expectation of these two groups

provides political strength to the existing testing system. Therefore, government interference and societal expectation change is highly required to bring about any change in the testing system. It can be easily deduced that bringing change and a positive outcome is a complex phenomenon that needs additional investigation and judicious planning for proper execution or else it might create backlash against any newly introduced system.

Negative Attitude Towards the Test and Students' Mental Well-being

The study found that when a test is graded the students test anxiety and mental stress increases and their test is directly impacted by the emotional factors. Surprisingly, it does not happen in terms of non-graded assessment like home work, class work and in-class assessments. This anxiety for tests stems from acculturative stress, fear of failure, fear of not meeting their and their guardians' expectation, fear of performing poorly compared to their classmates and negative association with the tests (Şenel & Tutunis, 2011). All these factors altogether reduce the reliability and validity of the tests as the students cannot perform well when they are stressed and anxious. The lack of any sort of counseling and advising at the secondary level worsen the issue to a great extent. When they cannot perform as it is expected by teachers and guardians considering the importance of such a high-stake test, it puts severe psychological impact on the students' well-being which is undoubtedly the negative washback of the testing system.

Apart from that, memorizing and internalizing the grammatical rules, high-frequency vocabulary and writing items such as paragraphs, essays, letters, dialogues takes a huge amount of time and it turns out to be a stressful and mentally draining process for the students. Since the students tend to think that those items are not related to their real life and they do not have to use them in real-life contexts, it becomes an even more difficult and tedious issue for them which

leads to burn out and negative washback. The negative effects of the testing system put forward the need to bring changes in the testing system in order to bring more positive washback.

CHAPTER 06: CONCLUSION

The study explored the washback effects encountered by the washback effects of the testing system on the teaching and learning practices at the secondary English classes and the reasons behind facing the positive or negative washback. The study reveals that negative attitude towards the test, lack of assessment literacy, incongruence between the curriculum and the testing system, dependency on coaching centers and guidebooks and teaching for the test are mainly responsible for negative washback on the students. These factors directly or indirectly affect the students that lead to mostly negative washback that have far-reaching consequences on the performance of the tests as well as psychological well-being of the students.

Recommendations

Based upon the findings and discussion of the study, the researcher would like to offer some recommendations. These will help reduce the negative washback on the students as well as the teachers and also help other stakeholders to support the students academically.

- Massive modification of test contents, format and testing system is required
- Listening and speaking should be integrated in the testing system as neglecting these two skills results in partial language learning
- There should be direct connection between the curriculum and testing system avoiding any discrepancy
- Textbook should be designed such a way that is easy to understand for the students and require no help from coaching centers and guidebooks
- The teachers should be trained in such a way so that they can be assessment literate

- Change in societal expectation should be brought in order to reduce grade obsession and anxiety among students, teachers and parents.

Limitation of the Study

Even though this study offers some crucial insights into the washback effects into a high-stake examination i.e. SSC, it has some limitations. Due to the qualitative nature of the study, the same size of the study was kept to a number of only six participants. Therefore, it is difficult to reach a conclusion based on the limited sample size and consider these samples as representative of all the students of all the schools of Bangladesh. However, Hossain and Tavakoli (2008) posits that homogeneity and centralization of all the schools of Bangladesh reveals that even though the findings of a particular study is specific to a particular study context, others schools are also seen to encounter the same phenomena.

The findings of this study also illustrate that the washback effect of SSC examination is similar to the washback effects of other high-stakes tests like JSC and HSC, explored in previous studies inside and outside Bangladesh.

Possible Future Research

The study puts forth the need to conduct rigorous and extensive further research in this domain of testing and assessment in order to discover how the existing testing system can be improved (Sultana, 2018). Further wide-ranging study studies covering a large number of participants including teachers, parents, administrators and other stakeholders are necessary to be carried out at the secondary school level of Bangladesh in order to gain extensive understanding about the washback effect of a high-stake test like SSC English examination.

Some of the possible future research areas with relates to this topic could be the following:

1. Research can be conducted to what extent parents', who are not directly connected to the classroom, expectation leads to washback effects
2. The role of coaching centers and commercial guidebooks in partial learning of the curriculum can be another possible area of study
3. There can be research on how the intensity of extensive preparation of SSC can lead to washback effects
4. Research can be done on to what extent students become communicatively competent after SSC examination as it is claimed by the curriculum

This study was conducted as the existing testing system is misaligned with the national curriculum of Bangladesh and puts a significant amount of negative washback on the students who sit for public examinations. Therefore, the study was carried out to explore the actual scenario and find out the reasons for facing positive or negative washback and the ways we can modify the testing system for the students. If the recommendations are put into practice, the students will be better supported. I strongly believe that the findings of this study will help the students, teachers, parents and other related bodies to understand the reasons for encountering washback effects and ways to foster more positive and less negative washback.

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