The Washback Effect Of The Iranian Universities Entrance Exam: Teachers' Insights

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Abstract

The Entrance Exam of the Universities (EEU) in Iran is a multiple-choice high-stakes test which clearly affects its stakeholders. This effect, generally known as washback, can be considered negative or positive depending on the test and its intended use. The EEU is designed to screen the high school graduates for admission into higher education. This study aimed to investigate the washback effect of this high-stakes test on the Iranian high school English teachers. To achieve the aim of the study, a validated survey questionnaire was administered to stratified random sample of 132 high school English teachers who were teaching in the five main educational districts in the city of Isfahan, Iran. The data analysis revealed that the EEU negatively and implicitly influences English teachers to teach to the content and format of the test. Additionally, little attention was given to three language skills of speaking, writing, and listening in the classroom as these skills are not tested in the EEU.

Keywords: Entrance Exam of the Universities (EEU), washback, high-stakes test, stakeholder, teachers' perspectives.

Introduction

Testing is not teaching and we can insist that the operation of testing is distinct from teaching and must be seen as a method of providing information that may be used for teaching and other purposes. However, the reality is, as Davies (1990, p. 24) puts it, that, "testing is always used in teaching, in the sense that much teaching is related to the testing which is demanded of the student". In recent years, many researchers as well as methodology authorities have been concerned about the impact of testing on teaching and learning (e.g., Ghoorchaei, Tavakoli, & Nejad Ansari, 2010; Green, 2007; Luxia, 2007; Jin, 2006). Investigation in this area as to the effect of tests that is technically called washback or backwash effect – a term popular in British applied linguistics – has borne fruitful results.

The concept of testing can be viewed from two different perspectives: traditional testing and use-oriented testing (Shohamy, 2001). The main focus of traditional testing is on designing and developing quality tests to accurately measure the knowledge of testers. Traditional view focuses on the objective type of items and ignores the test use. In fact, traditional testing takes tests as isolated events from test takers, educational system, and society. Use-oriented testing, on the other hand, takes testing as an embedded issue in educational, social and political contexts. This view "addresses issues related to the rationale for giving tests and the effects that tests have on test takers, education and society" (Shohamy, 2001, p. 4). A great number of issues such as test takers' activities for the test, the teachers' method of teaching, materials designed for the test, and the effects of the test results on the stakeholders are all taken into consideration in use-oriented view of testing. Therefore, from use-oriented view of testing, this study aimed to investigate the washback effect of the entrance exam of the universities (EEU) on the Iranian high school English teachers.

Research Background

Bailey (1996) cites Hughes' (1993) trichotomy to show washback function in actual contexts of teaching and learning. Hughes claimed that three aspects of backwash are needed to be explained. Hughes stated that a model of backwash can be constructed through the trichotomy of participants, process and product (see Table 1). He believes that, first of all, the nature of a test influences the perceptions and attitudes of the participants towards their teaching and learning activities. These perceptions and attitudes also influence what the participants do to carry out their work (process), including practicing the kind of items available in the test, which influence the learning outcomes (product).

Table 1: The trichotomy of backwash model (Hughes, 1993, p. 2)

Participants	Students, classroom teachers, administrators, and materials developers and publishers whose perceptions and attitudes towards their work may be affected by a test.
Process	Any actions taken by the participants which may contribute to the process of learning.
Product	What is learned and the quality of the learning.

While Hughes considered participants, processes, and products as the basic elements in his backwash model, Smith (1991) constructed a model in which five components of change were shown: the target system, the management system (consisting of both the members of the system and the structures within the system), the innovation itself, available resources, and the context in which the change is supposed to take place. Markee (1997) showed that how changes can be designed, introduced, and maintained. He introduced his model in a way that who (participants) adopts (process) what (the innovation), where (the context), when (the time duration), why (the rationale), and how (different approaches in managing innovation). These sample models intend to describe

the function of washback phenomenon in both teaching and learning, and serve as frameworks for the present study of the washback effect.

Although a great number of studies have been conducted on the washback effect of the tests in different contexts, little attention has been given to the high-stakes university entrance exams. Researchers from China, Hong Kong, Japan, Israel, and Turkey dealt with the English section of the university entrance exams in their own countries. Qi (2004) investigated the intended washback effect of the English section of the National Matriculation Test in China. The results of her study revealed that there was a noticeable discrepancy between what the test constructors intended and what the teachers and students practiced in schools, indicating the inefficiency of the test for bringing about pedagogical changes in Chinese schools. Cheng (2004) explored the washback effect of Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) change on the teachers and their classroom teaching behaviors in secondary schools. The researcher concluded that certain washback effects on teachers' attitudes towards the modified exam could be seen, although teachers' teaching activities were not influenced by the exam reform.

Watanabe (2004) investigated the washback effects of the Japanese university entrance exam on classroom instruction. He concluded that the entrance exam caused only some kinds of negative washback to only some aspects of some teachers' lessons. Moreover, positive washback was seen in the entrance exam in a way the teachers could make use of the exam preparation as an opportunity to improve the English learners' proficiency. Ferman (2004) examined the washback effects of the Israeli national EFL oral matriculation test on the educational processes, the participants and the products of teaching and learning in high schools. The findings of her study showed that "the EFL oral matriculation test resulted in both positive and negative washback on the processes, the products, and those involved" (p. 204). Similarly, in Turkey, Yildirim (2010) investigated the effects of the English Component of the Foreign Language University Entrance Exam (ECFLUEE) on future EFL teachers' language proficiencies, and on their performances in their first year classes at university. The results of his study indicated that the exam had some negative washback effects on the students' language proficiency and on their performance in their first year classes at university. In summary, all the above mentioned studies showed that washback is a highly complex phenomenon.

Picking up on the complexity of washback phenomenon, this study aimed at exploring the washback effect of the EEU in Iran on the high school English teachers. Since1960s, the EEU in Iran has been the sole criterion for the admission into higher education. This national test is a combination of some multiple-choice items and cloze tests regarding most of the courses that the students have been taught during a period of four years study in high school and pre-university center. It is administered in five main groups of students depending on their fields of study in high school. Some of the topics including English, Persian Literature, Arabic, and Theology are tested for the students in all the majors. The English section of the test includes 25 multiple-choice items and a cloze test. The students are given 20 minutes, as required by this section of the test, to answer the questions. The first six or seven items are regarding grammatical points and the

remaining items include vocabulary items, a short cloze passage and two short reading passages followed by some multiple-choice comprehension questions.

Table 2 summarizes the types of items in recent English subset of EEU. As it can be seen, out of 25 items of the test, eleven items assess exclusively grammatical competence and knowledge of discrete vocabulary items. The other fourteen items test integrative skills or reading skill. The cloze test requires students to know the correct verb form or the right preposition in a certain sentence. In some cases, it also requires understanding of relationships between adjacent sentences or clauses, asking students to choose the correct conjunction, connector or to interpret a reference. The "situation comprehension" and "text comprehension" items include questions that aim at testing general understanding of the text, the intention of the text, and inferences that can be drawn from the text. In general, the questions in the examination range from those that test basic knowledge of grammar and vocabulary to those ask for general understanding of short texts, as well as inference making of specific passages.

Table 2: English test item types in the EEU

Type of evaluation	Number of items	Competence (Skill)
Identification of grammatically correct construction in a given context	6	Grammar
Diagnosing the correct and exact vocabulary	5	Vocabulary
Cloze test	5	Integrative (reading, writing, and grammar)
Situation comprehension	3	Reading comprehension
Text comprehension	6	Reading comprehension

Method

Research design

A teachers' questionnaire was used as the research instrument in this survey study to explore the perceptions and attitudes of high school English teachers towards the washback effect of the EEU on English teaching in Iranian high schools. In the development process of the questionnaire, in order to ensure validity and reliability, first of all, the researchers reviewed the relevant literature and examined the questionnaires designed for similar purposes. The first draft of the questionnaire was developed considering the issues pointed in the literature (Mizutani, 2009; Ferman, 2004; Watanabe, 2004; Donna Chen, 2002, Cheng, 1998; Cheng, 1997; Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman, 1996; Andrews, 1995; Alderson & Wall, 1993). Then two separate forms were designed for the questionnaire. The content validation form required the experts to rate

each item of the questionnaire based on two criteria: (a) the clarity of the meaning of the item, and (b) the appropriateness of the item in representing the topic. The face validation form required the experts to judge about the components of visual appeal, quality of instructions to respondents, scoring format, page layout, number of sections, number of items, wording of items, relevance of items to the EEU context, and length of time needed to complete the questionnaire. Then, the first draft of the questionnaire, content validation form and face validation form were sent to two experts to be reviewed in order to ensure the content validity and face validity of the questionnaire (Mizutani, 2009; Cheng, 1998).

Following the suggestions from the experts, the first draft of the questionnaire was revised and the necessary changes were made in the second draft. The second draft of the questionnaire was piloted on 36 high school English teachers. The main purpose of piloting the second draft of the questionnaire was twofold: (a) to test the internal reliability of the instrument, (b) to foresee the possible problems that can be encountered in the administration process due to the wording of the items (Cheng, 1998; Mizutani, 2009). For the first purpose, Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated for the questionnaire to see the internal reliability of the questionnaire. The coefficient was found to be 0.91 indicating a good internal reliability for the questionnaire. For the second purpose, in order to ensure the clarity of the questionnaire items, some minor changes in the wording of the items were made considering the problems encountered during the pilot study.

Three of the thirty-six English teachers participated in the pilot study were also randomly selected for cognitive interview (sometimes referred to as "thinking aloud" method). Such a method was employed as a procedure for construct validation to provide an opportunity for the respondents to react to various aspects of the questionnaire and make any additional remarks regarding the issues addressed in the survey (Cohen & Manion, 1989). The aim of the cognitive interviews was to determine whether (a) the questionnaire items were understood as intended by the researcher, and (b) they were understood in the same way by all the teachers. Hence, the teachers' viewpoints on the questionnaire structure, the design of the categories, items, and wordings helped to shape the final draft of the questionnaire and prepare it for the main study.

Structure and content of the questionnaire

The final version of the questionnaire consisted of two main parts and was designed and prepared in English. The first part consisted of six categories of teacher personal characteristics related to (a) demographic information, including gender, age, academic qualifications, and professional qualifications, and (b) current teaching situations, such as major grades that were currently being taught and the medium of instruction in the classroom. All the items in this part were designed on a multiple-choice basis. The second part consisted of four categories and 32 items altogether. This part mainly dealt with the teachers' attitudes and perceptions of the EEU. All four categories of this part were designed on a five-point Likert scale of agreement, where five = strongly agree, four = agree, three = undecided, two = disagree, and one = strongly disagree.

Sampling for the survey

The exact population of high school English teachers in the city of Isfahan was not known because some of the English teachers taught in several governmental and non-profit high schools. However, according to the statistical report by the Ministry of Education (ME) in 2010, there were 473 high schools and 3488 high school classes in the city of Isfahan, located in 5 main educational districts. Considering these statistics, an estimated method based upon the total number of classes and average classes a teacher taught was used to calculate the target population. Each English teacher taught an average of 8 classes; therefore, the estimated number of teachers in the target population was 436, which was derived by having 3488 divided by 8. Based upon the table for determining random sample size from a given population suggested by Payne & McMorris (1967), 200 English teachers were sampled. Stratified random sampling was used to ensure that adequate numbers of English teachers were represented from each educational district. Gender was not considered a determining factor in choosing the subjects.

The questionnaires were distributed through two different channels and the response rates were different for each channel. (a) Some questionnaires were directly emailed to the teachers and occasional gentle reminders were helpful to request them to complete the questionnaires and return them to the researcher. (b) Some other questionnaires were mailed to the school principals and English language teachers' coordinators in five main educational districts with stamped addressed envelopes. The final mutual agreements about the administration and return procedures were reached via telephone before mailing the questionnaires and envelopes. The school principals and English language teachers' coordinators subsequently arranged for the questionnaires to be carried out and returned back to the researcher. The total return rate was 66 % (132 questionnaires were returned).

Results

Teachers' demographic information

The demographic characteristics of the surveyed teachers are depicted in Table 3.

Table 3: Demographic characteristics of the teachers

Items	Variables	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	67	50.8
	Female	65	49.2
Age	20-30	42	31.8
	31-40	53	40.2
	41-50	26	19.7
	Above 50	11	8.3

Table 3: Demographic characteristics of the teachers (cont.)

Academic qualifications	BA	64	48.5
	BSc	1	0.8
	Masters	55	41.7
	Others	12	9.1
Professional qualifications	Teacher's Certificate	51	38.6
	Advanced Diploma in Edu.	35	26.5
	Others	46	34.8
Major grades of teaching	Grade One	12	9.1
	Grade Two	12	9.1
	Grade Three	38	28.8
	Pre-university level	70	53.0
Medium of instruction	English only	25	18.9
	English supplemented with occasional Persian explanation	42	31.8
	Half English and half Persian	42	31.8
	Mainly Persian	23	17.4

It can be seen in the table that almost half of the teacher respondents were male (50.8 %) and the other half (49.2 %) were female. Almost three fourth of the teachers aged 20 to 40 and the remaining one fourth aged over 40 indicating that the majority of the English teachers were young or middle-aged. About half of the respondents (48.5 %) had BA and more than 40 percent of them had MA. One teacher had also BSc which shows he has not studied English as an academic major. Almost two third (65.1 %) of the sampled teachers were qualified professionally because they held teacher's certificate or advanced diploma in education. More than half of the respondents (53 %) were teaching in pre-university centers as the major grade that they were teaching.

When the high school teachers were asked about the medium of instruction they use when they teach English in the classroom, about one-third of the respondents (31.8 %) stated that they use English supplemented with occasional Persian explanation. Another one-third of the sampled teachers (31.8 %) also reported that they use half English and half Persian when teaching English in the classroom. Moreover, 18.9 and 17.4 percent of the respondents use English only and mainly Persian in the classroom. As is shown in Table 3 and Figure 1, there are more teachers who use 'English supplemented with occasional Persian explanation' and 'half English and half Persian' as their medium of instruction compared to those who use 'English only' as the medium of instruction in teaching English in the classroom.
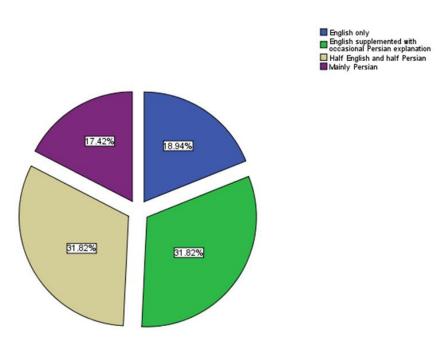
Figure 1: Teachers' medium of instruction in the classroom

Teachers' attitudes and perceptions of the EEU

The purpose of the second part of the questionnaire was to explore the teachers' attitudes and perceptions of the EEU. The obtained results from the categories of this part are reported according to the following themes:
(a) The reasons behind the EEU
(b) The current format of the EEU
(c) Possible pressure under the EEU
(d) Teaching methods teachers adopt due to the context of the EEU

(a) The reasons behind the EEU

When the respondents were asked what they believed as the main reasons for the Ministry of Education (ME) to administer the EEU, all the items got the mean scores below four, indicating the teachers' negative attitude towards these items as the major reasons for administering the EEU (see Table 4a). However, as it can be seen in Table 4b, about three fourth of the high school teachers (73.5 %) voted the EEU as an exam which evaluates talented students and two third of them (65.9 %) considered EEU as an exam which meets the demands of tertiary education. Moreover, about half of the sampled teachers (49.3 %) believed that the EEU widens the gap between the top and low students and 42.4 percent also saw the EEU as a high-stakes exam preparing the students for their future carrier.

On the other hand, the majority of the respondents i.e. 76.5 % indicated that the EEU does not narrow the gap between English use in and outside the classroom. Exactly three fourth of the teachers explicitly disagreed with the EEU function which motivates students to use integrated skills. About two third of them also believed that EEU is not considered as an exam to enable students to communicate more with others and encourage test-takers to play an active role in learning. More than half of the respondents (56.8 %) also indicated that the EEU does not encourage better textbooks. The sampled teachers' beliefs about these five items represent their negative attitude towards the communicative aspects of this exam. In general, the majority of the respondents did not believe in these five items as the major reasons for administering the EEU.

Table 4a: Teachers' attitudes towards the reasons behind the EEU administration
according to the mean scores

Statements	Mean
To evaluate talented students	3.81
To meet the demands of tertiary education	3.52
To widen the gap between the top and low students	3.21
To prepare students for their future carrier	2.96
To encourage better textbooks	2.37
To encourage students to play an active role in learning	2.32
To enable students to communicate more with others	2.21
To narrow the gap between English use in and outside the class	2.06
To motivate students to use integrated skills	2.06

Table 4b: Teachers' attitudes towards the reasons behind the EEU administration

Statements	Strongly disagree and disagree		Undecided		Agree and strongly agree	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
To meet the demands of tertiary education	33	25.0	12	9.1	87	65.9
To prepare students for their future carrier	55	41.7	21	15.9	55	42.4
To evaluate talented students	29	22.0	6	4.5	97	73.5

Table 4b: Teachers' attitudes towards the reasons behind the EEU administration
(cont.)

To narrow the gap between English use in and outside the class	101	76.5	11	8.3	20	15.2
To widen the gap between the top and low students	48	36.4	19	14.4	65	49.3
To motivate students to use integrated skills	99	75.0	5	3.8	29	21.2
To encourage students to play an active role in learning	85	64.4	8	6.1	39	29.6
To enable students to communicate more with others	89	67.4	11	8.3	32	24.3
To encourage better textbooks	75	56.8	28	21.2	29	21.9

(b) The current format of the EEU

The responses given when respondents were asked 'what are the major characteristics that you have perceived in the exam papers of the EEU in recent years?' showed that the majority of the teachers (84.8 %) believed that the current exam papers of the EEU in recent years emphasize the reading comprehension skill (see Table 5). This can implicitly motivate high school teachers to teach to the test and raise students as capable comprehensive readers. Such an attitude can make teachers ignore productive skills of writing and speaking and receptive skill of listening. This does necessarily mean that the teachers are affected by this high-stakes exam and it makes them direct their teaching method towards the test. As the obtained results show, the majority of the sampled teachers indicated that the exam papers of the EEU in recent years are not practical at all and do not focus on the use of English in real life situations. Moreover, more than three-fourth of the respondents (80.3 %) believed that the EEU items are not related to communicative aims and communicative activities, and do not emphasize productive skills such as speaking and writing. About three-fourth of them (73.5 %) indicated that the designers of EEU papers do not pay attention to integrated and task-based approaches.

Table 5: The teachers' perceptions of the current formats of the EEU

Statements	Strongly disagree and disagree		Undecided		Agree and strongly agree	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
More related to communicative aims	106	80.3	7	5.3	19	14.4
More integrated and task-based approaches	97	73.5	10	7.6	25	18.9
More practical and closer to real life	111	84.1	7	5.3	14	10.6
Closer to the use of English in real life situations	110	83.3	8	6.1	14	10.6
More emphasis on reading comprehension	11	8.3	9	6.8	112	84.8
More emphasis on communicative activities	106	80.3	9	6.8	17	12.9
More emphasis on productive skills such as speaking and writing	106	80.3	11	8.3	15	11.4

(c) Possible pressure under the EEU

In this category, the high school English teachers were asked what kind of extra work or pressure the EEU puts on their teaching. As it can be seen in tables 6a and 6b, five items got the highest ratings. The majority of the respondents (84.1 %) believed that the EEU makes them organize more exam practices (mean = 4.07). This belief is a clear indication of the teachers' attention to the EEU. They try to deal with practicing more mock exam papers of the EEU and prepare the students to sit for this exam. This does necessarily mean that the teachers are affected by this high-stakes exam and it makes them direct their teaching method towards the test. More than two third of the respondents (67.5 %) indicated that they have to employ new teaching methods to fulfill the students' expectations. It is obvious that the students' expectations affect teachers to teach in a way to satisfy students' needs for passing this exam. Moreover, about two third of the respondents believed that the EEU forces them to revise some parts of the existing materials, follow the teaching syllabus, and prepare more materials for the students. Such beliefs indicated that the teachers modify the available materials and prepare more materials for the test-takers to meet their needs for passing this exam. On the other hand, more than half of the sampled teachers (56.1 %) believed that the EEU does not force

them to attend the classes prepared (mean = 2.55). The teachers are not required to prepare different segments for each lesson section. However, this belief does not necessarily mean that the teachers are willing towards the possible changes in the format of the EEU.

Table 6a: The teachers' perceptions of extra work and pressure under the EEU according to the mean scores

Statements	Mean
Organizing more exam practices	4.07
Employing new teaching methods	3.59
Revising some of the existing materials	3.58
Following the teaching syllabus	3.56
Preparing more materials for students	3.31
Meeting new challenges in teaching	3.30
Setting up new teaching objectives	3.10
Doing more lesson preparation	2.55

Table 6b: The teachers' perceptions of extra work and pressure under the EEU

Statements	Strongly disagree and disagree		Undecided		Agree and strongly agree	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Following the teaching syllabus	30	22.7	21	15.9	81	61.4
Doing more lesson preparation	74	56.1	16	12.1	42	31.8
Preparing more materials for students	45	34.1	7	5.3	80	60.6
Revising some of the existing materials	30	22.7	15	11.4	87	65.9
Employing new teaching methods	29	22.0	14	10.6	89	67.5
Setting up new teaching objectives	44	33.3	34	25.8	54	41.0
Meeting new challenges in teaching	32	24.2	37	28.0	63	47.7
Organizing more exam practices	13	9.8	8	6.1	111	84.1

(d) Teaching methods teachers adopt due to the context of the EEU

When the teachers were asked about changes they make in their teaching due to the context of the EEU, the majority of them (89.4 %) indicated that they put more stress on reading comprehension activities (see Table 7). This finding is in direct accordance with the results regarding the teachers' attitudes towards the current format of the EEU when they were asked what they perceived as the major characteristics of the exam papers of the EEU in recent years. In that category, the teachers also believed that the current exam papers of the EEU in recent years emphasize the reading comprehension skill. Hence, the teachers may be affected in a way to ignore productive skills of writing and speaking and receptive skill of listening. About three fourth of the teachers (74.2 %) also indicated that they teach according to the EEU format due to the pressure from the context of this test. This finding clearly shows that the teachers are negatively influenced by the washback effect of the EEU. According to the teachers' beliefs, they direct their teaching methods towards the test format and adopt new teaching methods to help their students perform well on the EEU. Even about two third of the teachers (60.6 %) believed that the EEU motivates them to encourage their students to participate in class. However, this does not necessarily mean that the teachers involve their students in all four language skills.

On the other hand, the majority of the surveyed teachers (82 %) believed that they do not employ communicative approach in their teaching due to the context of the EEU indicating how much the EEU has negatively affected the teachers' method of teaching. Although most of the teachers are the supporters of the communicative approach and task-based approach as the best methods of teaching, they do not employ these methods when they are teaching in high school classes. Moreover, more than three fourth of the respondents (78 %) confirmed that they do not employ real life language tasks, and more than two third of the sampled teachers indicated that they even ignore the communicative skills and integration of skills. In general, these findings supported the results obtained from the teachers' attitudes towards the current format of the EEU when they were asked what they perceived as the major characteristics of the exam papers of the EEU in recent years. In that category, the respondents also believed that the task-based activities, real life activities, productive skills, and integrated activities are ignored in the current exam papers of the EEU.

Table 7: The teachers' attitudes towards teaching methods due to the context of EEU

Statements	Strongly disagree and disagree		Undecided		Agree and strongly agree	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
To teach according to the test format	30	22.7	4	3.0	98	74.2

Table 7: The teachers' attitudes towards teaching methods due to the context of EEU
(cont.)

To adopt new teaching methods	36	27.3	7	5.3	89	67.5
To use a more communicative approach in teaching	82	62.1	4	3.0	46	34.8
To put more stress on reading comprehension activities	9	6.8	5	3.8	118	89.4
To put more emphasis on communicative skills	73	55.3	11	8.3	48	36.3
To put more emphasis on the integration of skills	70	53.0	12	9.1	50	37.9
To employ more real life language tasks	78	59.1	15	11.4	39	29.5
To encourage more students' participation in class	38	28.8	14	10.6	80	60.6

Discussion and Conclusion

The negative washback of the EEU can be seen in the teachers' tendency towards using Persian as the medium of instruction in English classes. The reason might refer to the teachers' concerns and worries over their current students' English level. The teachers try to get the meaning of the language across to students so the students can better perform on the EEU. This point is, in fact, one of the teachers' ideal aims. Moreover, the teachers' attitudes towards the major reasons for administering the EEU indicated that the high school English teachers did not have a positive attitude towards the high-stakes exam of the EEU.

The findings of the study clearly indicated that the current exam papers of the EEU in recent years emphasize the reading comprehension skill, vocabulary learning and basic grammar knowledge. This may explicitly encourage high school English teachers to direct their teaching style to the test format and ignore doing communicative activities and practicing productive skills in the classroom. Such a negative tendency towards emphasizing some skills over the others might be acceptable for some English language teachers in specific language environments considering the learners' needs, but ignoring other language skills seems to be far from the ideal for most of the Iranian high school graduates.

Furthermore, the majority of the surveyed teachers believed that the EEU makes them organize and practice more mock exam papers of the EEU and prepare their students to

sit for this exam. This does necessarily mean that the teachers are affected by this high-stakes exam and it makes them direct their teaching method towards the test. Since the EEU is regarded as a passport letting the students experience a newer and brighter world, the teachers do not look at the high school years as the years for learning all four language skills. Instead, they motivate their students to spend a great amount of time and energy on practicing mock exam papers and test taking strategies which will be useless from the day after the EEU date.

The teachers' negative reaction to the current format of the EEU can clearly indicate the existing shortcomings of this high-stakes exam. The context and format of this exam explicitly motivate both teachers and students to do more grammar-based exercises in the classroom, and pay insufficient attention to three language skills of speaking, writing, and listening. Therefore, the basic changes of this exam can direct all the stakeholders' attention to involving a continuous, integrated use of both productive and receptive skills of English learning. However, this does not necessarily mean that the teachers will embrace the possible changes and modify their teaching methods.

Although the overall results of this study indicated that the EEU has negative effects on the teachers' method of teaching in the classroom, the elimination of this exam would not be practical at the moment; however, there is optimism that this exam will become obsolete in the near future. Hence, the basic revision of the EEU format is recommended which can in turn affect teachers' teaching activities and students' learning activities in the high schools. Moreover, the necessity of conducting various research studies on the EEU stakeholders to know their perceptions and attitudes towards this exam seems apparent.

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Appendix A

The washback effect of the Iranian universities entrance exam:Teachers' insights

Dear Colleague,

This study aims to investigate the nature and scope of the Entrance Exam of the Universities (EEU) washback effect on the Iranian high school English teachers. To help us, please fill in this questionnaire according to your own opinions. All responses provided will be confidential and used for research purposes only. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

PART ONE: Please tick the appropriate answer.

 (1) Your gender:

Female	
Male	

(2) Your age:

20-30	
31-40	
41-50	
Above 50	

(3) Your academic qualifications:

BA	
BSc	
Masters	
Others	

(4) Your professional qualifications:

Teacher's Certificate	
Advanced Diploma in Education	
Others	

(5) Major grade you currently teach:

Grade One	
Grade Two	
Grade Three	
Pre-university Centers	

(6) What is the medium of instruction you use when you teach English in the classroom?

English only	
English supplemented with occasional Persian explanation	
Half English and half Persian	
Mainly Persian	

PART TWO: For each item, please tick only one box, which comes closest to your opinion.
(1) What do you see as the major reasons for the Ministry of Education to administer the EEU?

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
To meet the demands of tertiary education					

PART TWO (1) (cont.)

To prepare students for their future carrier					
To evaluate talented students					
To narrow the gap between English use in class and outside the class					
To widen the gap between the top and low students					
To motivate students to use integrated skills					
To encourage students to play an active role in learning					
To enable students to communicate more with others					
To encourage better textbooks					

(2) What are the major characteristics that you have perceived in the exam papers of EEU in recent years?

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
More related to communicative aims					
More integrated and task-based approaches					
More practical and closer to real life					
Closer to the use of English in real life situations					
More emphasis on reading comprehension					
More emphasis on communicative activities					
More emphasis on productive skills such as speaking and writing					

(3) What kind of extra work or pressure if any do you think the EEU will put on you in your teaching?

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
Following the teaching syllabus					
Doing more lesson preparation					
Preparing more materials for students					

PART TWO (3) (cont.)

Revising some of the existing materials					
Employing new teaching methods					
Setting up new teaching objectives					
Meeting new challenges in teaching					
Organizing more exam practices					

(4) What are the major changes you make in your teaching due to the context of EEU?

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
To teach according to the test format					
To adopt new teaching methods					
To use a more communicative approach in teaching					
To put more stress on reading comprehension activities					
To put more emphasis on communicative skills					
To put more emphasis on the integration of skills					
To employ more real life language tasks					
To encourage more students' participation in class					

About the authors

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