

ORIGINAL ARTICLES

Washback of High-stakes Tests on the Parents: Case of Entrance Exam of Universities (EEU) in Iran

¹Hadi Salehi, ²Melior Md Yunus and ³Zeinab Salehi

^{1,3}*Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Isfahan, Iran*

²*Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), Bangi, Malaysia*

ABSTRACT

The term washback refers to the connections between language testing and language teaching and learning in general, and the impact of testing on teaching and learning in particular. The Entrance Exam of the Universities (EEU) in Iran is a high-stakes competitive test which explicitly influences all its stakeholders. This paper reports the quantitative findings of a study conducted on the Iranian parents to investigate their perceptions of the EEU washback effect on the parents. To collect the data, a validated questionnaire with 24 items altogether was randomly administered to 30 Iranian parents from the city of Isfahan whose children were in pre-university level preparing themselves to participate in the upcoming EEU. The analysis of the findings showed that the Iranian parents have negative perceptions of the high-stakes exam of the EEU; however, they motivate their children to study for this exam. The majority of the parents stated that although they dislike this exam, they provide a suitable environment for their children and provide them with supplementary materials. This explicitly showed the pressure the EEU puts on the parents especially when their children are preparing themselves to participate in the EEU. However, the results obtained from the parents need to be triangulated through the data obtained from other stakeholders of the EEU such as the teachers, students, principals, test designers and even the publishers.

Key words: Washback, Entrance Exam of the Universities (EEU), Parents, High-stakes test, Stakeholder

Introduction

The property of the test that concerns its effects on teaching and learning is commonly known as washback. The concept of washback is deeply rooted in the belief that tests or examinations can and should drive teaching and learning. Popham (1987) refers to this notion as “measurement-driven instruction”. To this end, a match or an overlap between the content and format of the test or the examination and the content and format of the curriculum is highly encouraged. This notion is also referred to as “curriculum alignment” by Shepard (1993). Although the conception of alignment – needing to establish a match between the test and the curriculum – has been viewed by some as “unethical,” and threatening the test validity (Haladyna, Nolen, & Haas, 1991, p. 4; Widen, O’Shea, & Pye, 1997), the presence of such alignment is clearly evident in a number of countries such as Japan, China, Hong Kong, Spain, Turkey, and New Zealand (Cheng 1998). The presence of this alignment, in which a new or revised examination is introduced into the educational system to improving teaching and learning, is referred to as systemic validity by Frederiksen and Collins (1989), consequential validity by Messick (1989 and 1996), test impact by Bachman and Palmer (1996) and Baker (1991).

According to Wall (1997), test impact and test washback are different in terms of the scope and of the effects. She believes that test impact refers to “... any of the effects that a test may have on individuals, policies or practices, within the classroom, the school, the educational system or society as a whole”, whereas washback (or backwash) is specifically defined as “the effects of tests on teaching and learning” (Wall, 1997, p. 291).

The recent developments in language testing, and measurement-driven reform of instruction in general education have been resulted from the study of washback. The focus of many research studies in language testing has been on whether and how we assess the specific features of a given group of test takers and whether and how we can incorporate such information into the methods in which we design language tests. The realization of this fact that a language test score represents a complex of multiple influences has been one of the most important theoretical developments in language testing in the past 30 years. Language test scores cannot be considered simplistically as a performance indicator of the particular language ability we assume we are assessing. In fact, the scores are also influenced by the characteristics and contents of the test tasks, the characteristics of the test takers, the strategies test takers employ in attempting to complete the test tasks, as well as the inferences we make from the test results. All these factors definitely interact with each other.

Corresponding Author: Hadi Salehi, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Isfahan, Iran

The focus of this study is on the washback associated with a high-stakes test. In this case, the high-stakes test is the Entrance Examination of the Universities (EEU), taken by approximately more than one million Iranian candidates each year in the final year of their secondary schooling. Success in the EEU is a prerequisite for entry to tertiary education. Hence, the results can play a significant role in decisions on university admission.

Literature Review:

Research Context:

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, the educational system of the country has gone under qualitative and quantitative changes. The structure of the education system in Iran is now basically divided into five cycles namely, pre-school, primary, middle, secondary and tertiary. A critical assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Iranian education system requires an in-depth analysis of its structure, which goes beyond the scope of this study.

In Iran, as in many other countries where a university entrance exam is the sole criterion for student selection, limited space and resources have restricted many talented and enthusiastic applicants seeking access to higher education (Kamyab, 2009). Therefore, the phenomenon of the university entrance exam has caused discontent and conflict. In June each year, high school graduates in Iran take the stringent centralized university entrance exam seeking a place in one of the state universities. The exam is so stringent that normally students spend a year preparing for it; those who fail are allowed to repeat the test in the following years until they pass it. EEU is a comprehensive, 4-hour multiple-choice exam that covers all subjects taught in Iranian high schools—from math and science to Islamic studies and foreign language. 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 react to the questions.

Background of the Study:

Almost 25 years ago, Alderson (1986) changed the focus of attention in language testing towards washback and identified it as a quite distinct area within language testing. Alderson (1986) examined the “potentially powerful influence of tests” (p. 104) and recommended making innovations in the language curriculum through innovations in language testing. Nearly at the same time, Davies (1985) was discussing whether tests should necessarily follow the curriculum, and suggested that perhaps tests should have this potentiality to lead and influence the curriculum. Besides, Morrow (1986) used the notion of washback validity to describe the relationship between testing, and teaching and learning. According to Morrow (1986), “an examination of washback validity would take testing researchers into the classroom in order to observe the effects of their tests in action” (p. 6).

It has been a long time that the examinations have been used for selecting purposes in education and employment. In some societies, examinations are viewed as ways to encourage the development of talent, to upgrade the performance of schools and colleges and to counter to some degree, nepotism, favoritism, and even outright corruption in the allocation of scarce opportunities (Bray & Steward, 1998; Eckstein & Noah, 1992). Linn (2000) categorized the application of tests as significant elements in relation to five waves of educational reform over the past 50 years: their tracing and selecting role in the 1950s; their program accountability role in the 1960s; minimum competency testing in the 1970s; school and district accountability in the 1980s; and the standards-based accountability systems in the 1990s (p. 4).

Although tests have a long and well-established place in the history of education, the use of them has, constantly, been subject to severe criticism. Nevertheless, tests and assessments continue to exist and occupy a leading place in the educational policies and practices of a great number of countries. Moreover, a group of researchers, have, over many years, supported the effects of testing on school and common classroom practices, and on the personal and professional lives and experiences of principals, teachers, students, parents and other educational stakeholders.

Petrie (1987) asserted that it is not an exaggeration to say that evaluation and testing are considered as the engine for implementing educational policy. The extent to which this statement is true depends on different contexts but a number of recurring themes may emerge. For a very long time, various kinds of examinations have been used for different aims in many different places. Moreover, there is a set of relationships, planned and unplanned, beneficial and harmful, between teaching and testing. These two facts represent that, although washback has only been identified relatively recently, it is likely that washback effects have been occurring for an equally long time. It is also probable that these teaching-testing relationships will become closer and more complicated in the future. Hence, it is essential that the education community cooperate together to understand and analyze the effects of the use of testing on various aspects of teaching and learning within different educational systems and contexts (Cheng, 2004).

Method:

This study employed a survey research to investigate the washback effect of the EEU on the Iranian parents. The participants consisted of 30 Iranian parents whose children were in pre-university level preparing themselves to sit for the upcoming EEU. In fact, the questionnaire was administered to 50 parents but the total return rate was 60 % (30 questionnaires were returned).

The questionnaire was originally designed in English; however, it was issued to the parents in Persian in order to minimize misunderstanding and validity and reliability problems caused by the language factor (Geisinger, 1994). The questionnaire was translated using back translation method from English to Persian back to English. Comparison between the two English and Persian versions (the original and the translated versions) was conducted to examine the exactness of the translations. The translated questionnaire was given to two professors in the field of English-Persian translation, and they were requested to judge the translated questionnaire. 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 questionnaire consisted of two parts and 24 items altogether. The first part included four items related to the gender, level of education, frequency of the school visit, and the numbers of private tutorials the parents considered for their child. All the items in this part were designed on a multiple-choice basis. The second part consisted of two sections related to the parents' activities at home to help their children pass the EEU and the parents' direct attitudes towards the EEU. The first section including 9 items was designed on a five-point Likert scale of frequency, where one = never, two = seldom, three = sometimes, four = often and five = always, and the second section with 11 items was designed on a five-point Likert scale of agreement, where one = strongly disagree, two = disagree, three = undecided, four = agree, and five = strongly agree

Findings and Discussion:

The findings are presented in three sections. First, the demographic data are presented, which is then followed by the respondents' activities at home to help their children pass the EEU. In the last section, the results are presented according to the parents' direct attitudes towards the EEU.

Demographic Data:

It can be seen in Table 1 that 80 % of the respondents were female and 20 % of them were male. When the surveyed parents were asked about their level of education, the majority of them (90 %) had diploma and bachelor degree, and just 10 % of them had post graduate degrees. The majority of the parents (83.3 %) visited the schools in which their children were studying almost once in a semester (see Table 1 and Figure 1). This clearly indicates the parents' direct attention to their children's educational status.

The obtained results for the number of weekly private tutorials the parents consider for their children showed that about one-third of the respondents (30 %) did not consider any weekly private tutorials for their children probably due to the financial pressure of attending these classes on their families (see Table 1 and Figure 2). However, less than half of them (46.7 %) sent their children to private classes once or twice a week. About one-fourth of the parents (23.3 %) also considered more than three sessions of weekly private classes for their children. This clearly indicates the parents' attention to English learning, necessarily due to the impact of the EEU on the parents and their children.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the parents

Items	Variables	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	6	20.0
	Female	24	80.0
Level of education	Diploma	12	40.0
	BSc/BA	15	50.0
	MSc/MA	2	6.7
	PhD	1	3.3
Frequency of visiting the school	Almost once a week	0	0.0
	Almost twice a month	1	3.3
	Almost once a month	4	13.3
	Almost once in a semester	25	83.3
Sessions of weekly private tutorials for the child	None	9	30.0
	Once or twice	14	46.7
	Three or four times	6	20.0
	More than five times	1	3.3

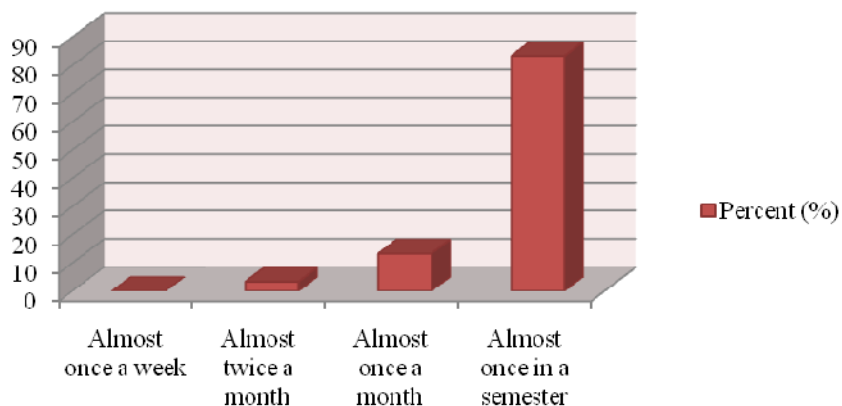


Fig. 1: Frequency of visiting the school

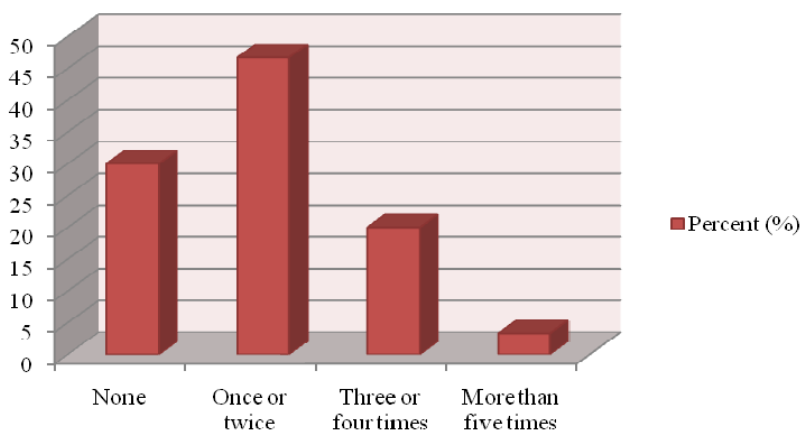


Fig. 2: Sessions of weekly private tutorials for the child

Parents' activities at home to help their children pass the EEU:

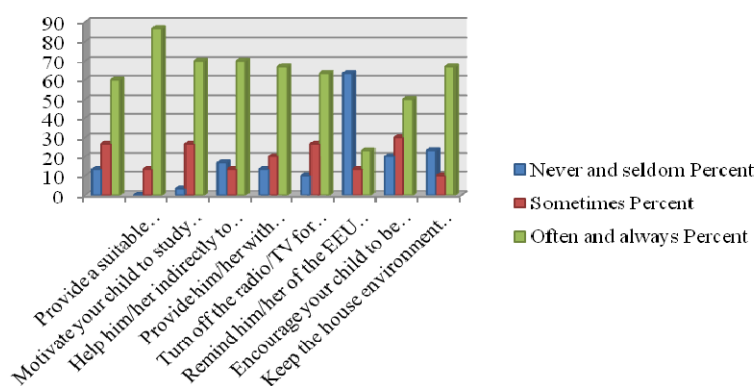
This category aimed to investigate the activities the parents carry out at home to help their children pass the EEU. The parents were asked to state how often they do the following nine activities at home. As Table 2 shows the items in descending order according to the mean scores, all activities excluding the last one (Remind him/her of the EEU date) have mean scores above 3.5, indicating that they were frequently carried out by the parents at home. From Table 3 and Figure 3, it can be seen that the majority of the surveyed parents frequently or always provide a suitable and calm environment for their children, motivate them to study for the EEU, help them indirectly to pass the EEU and provide them with supplementary materials. In general, the parents do whatever they can to help their children cope with the EEU. This clearly shows the explicit pressure the EEU puts on the families especially when their children are studying in pre-university center and preparing themselves to sit for the upcoming EEU.

Table 2: Parents' activities at home to help their children pass the EEU according to mean scores

Statements	Mean
Provide a suitable environment for your child to study for the EEU	4.30
Motivate your child to study for the EEU	4.00
Provide him/her with supplementary materials	3.90
Help him/her indirectly to pass the EEU	3.86
Turn off the radio/TV for his/her sake	3.70
Keep the house environment calm	3.66
Talk to your child about the importance of the EEU	3.66
Encourage your child to be aware of the EEU	3.53
Remind him/her of the EEU date	2.33

Table 3: Parents' activities at home to help their children pass the EEU

Statements	Never and seldom		Sometimes		Often and always	
Talk to your child about the importance of the EEU	4	13.3	8	26.7	18	60.0
Provide a suitable environment for your child to study for the EEU	0	0.0	4	13.3	26	86.7
Motivate your child to study for the EEU	1	3.3	8	26.7	21	70.0
Help him/her indirectly to pass the EEU	5	16.7	4	13.3	21	70.0
Provide him/her with supplementary materials	4	13.3	6	20.0	20	66.7
Turn off the radio/TV for his/her sake	3	10.0	8	26.7	19	63.3
Remind him/her of the EEU date	19	63.3	4	13.3	7	23.3
Encourage your child to be aware of the EEU	6	20.0	9	30.0	15	50.0
Keep the house environment calm	7	23.4	3	10.0	20	66.7

**Fig. 3:** Parents' activities at home to help their children pass the EEU

Parents' direct attitudes towards the EEU:

This category aimed to investigate the parents' direct attitudes towards the EEU. The parents were asked to state how they agreed with the following 11 statements. The results are shown in Tables 4 and 5, and Figure 4. Table 5 lists the statements in descending order according to the mean scores given by the parents. This table demonstrates a general overview of the parents' attitudes towards the EEU. Ten items out of eleven got the mean scores above 3 indicating that the parents to some extent agreed with the following items. Just when the surveyed parents were asked to state their viewpoint towards Item 6 (A student's score on the EEU is a good indication of how well she or he has learned the material), the majority of them (76.7 %) disagreed with this belief. As Table 4 shows, Item 2 (Students' learning is improved by practicing mock exam papers of the EEU) and Item 7 (EEU should NOT be used as the sole criterion for admission into tertiary education) produced the strongest agreement among the surveyed parents. This was followed by items 10 and 4 ('Most of the students work hard to achieve their best in the EEU' and 'EEU forces students to study harder', respectively). This reflected the parents' mixed feelings about the examinations. On the one hand, they did not look at examinations as an accurate reflection of all aspects of their children's study; while, on the other hand, they believed in mock exam papers of the EEU as an important lever for students' learning. The mixed feelings towards the examinations were also demonstrated by the following two items: 'Most of the students dislike the EEU' but 'EEU is one of the motivations for students' learning'.

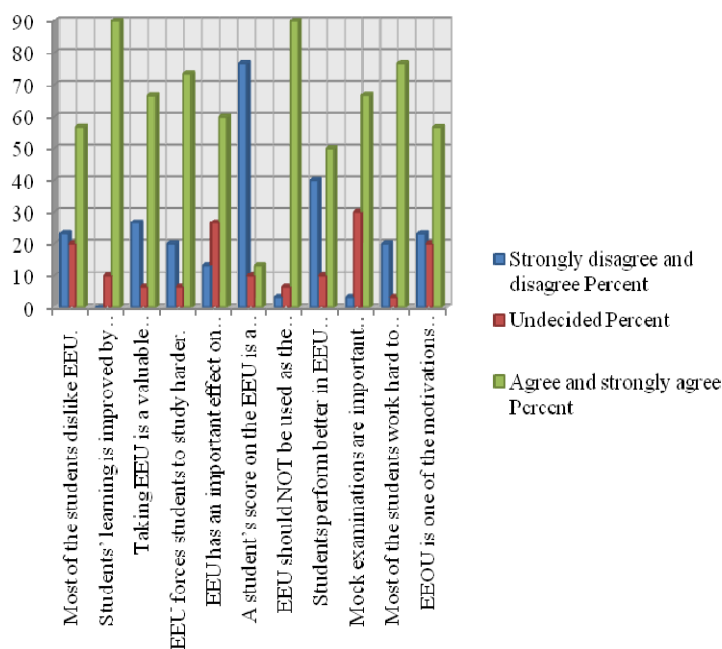
Table 4: Parents' direct attitudes towards the EEU

Statements	Strongly disagree and disagree		Undecided		Agree and strongly agree	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Most of the students dislike EEU.	7	23.4	6	20.0	17	56.7
Students' learning is improved by practicing mock exam papers of the EEU.	0	0.0	3	10.0	27	90.0
Taking EEU is a valuable learning experience.	8	26.7	2	6.7	20	66.6
EEU forces students to study harder.	6	20.0	2	6.7	22	73.3
EEU has an important effect on student self-image.	4	13.3	8	26.7	18	60.0
A student's score on the EEU is a good indication of how well she or he has learned the material.	23	76.7	3	10.0	4	13.3

EEU should NOT be used as the sole criterion for admission into tertiary education.	1	3.3	2	6.7	27	90.0
Students perform better in EEU situation rather than in normal teaching situation.	12	40	3	10.0	15	50.0
Mock examinations are important ways to learn.	1	3.3	9	30.0	20	66.7
Most of the students work hard to achieve their best in the EEU.	6	20.0	1	3.3	23	76.7
EEU is one of the motivations for students' learning.	7	23.3	6	20	17	56.6

Table 5: Parents' direct attitudes towards the EEU according to mean scores

Statements	Mean
Students' learning is improved by practicing mock exam papers of the EEU	4.20
EEU should NOT be used as the sole criterion for admission into tertiary education.	4.13
Most of the students work hard to achieve their best in the EEU.	3.83
EEU forces students to study harder.	3.80
Mock examinations are important ways to learn.	3.73
EEU has an important effect on student self-image.	3.66
Taking EEU is a valuable learning experience.	3.56
EEU is one of the motivations for students' learning.	3.53
Most of the students dislike EEU.	3.36
Students perform better in EEU situation rather than in normal teaching situation.	3.00
A student's score on the EEU is a good indication of how well she or he has learned the material.	2.13

**Fig. 4:** Parents' direct attitudes towards the EEU**Conclusion:**

The participants' responses showed that the EEU is a competitive exam which directly and negatively affects both the parents and their children. The surveyed parents had a general negative attitude towards the high-stakes exam of the EEU and the majority of them stated that they frequently or always do whatever they can to help their children cope with the EEU. This clearly shows the explicit pressure the EEU puts on the families especially when their children are studying in pre-university level and preparing themselves to sit for the EEU. The main point that the parents need to take note of is that though they like to help their children pass the EEU, they should not remind them of the EEU date as it makes the children stressful.

This research was limited to the study of EEU washback effect on the Iranian parents. Due to a constraint of time and cost, no longitudinal studies have been conducted since the beginning of the EEU administration. As the EEU acts as a passport letting the students enter the tertiary education, language testing researchers are highly recommended to conduct extensive longitudinal studies on the impact of the EEU on all its stakeholders in order to evaluate in what way and to what extent this high-stakes exam influences English teaching and learning over a period of time. The longitudinal studies, in general, might help to explain how public examinations influence all the stakeholders. Moreover, it is recommended that further researches could focus

more on the stakeholders of this high-stakes exam to know their perceptions and attitudes towards different aspects of this exam.

Note: One part of this paper was orally presented in International Conference on Language, Literature and Linguistics (ICLLL) in Dubai in December, 2011.

References

- Alderson, J.C., 1986. Innovations in language testing, in Portal, M (Ed.) *Innovations in language testing: Proceedings of the IUS/NFER Conference*, Windsor, UK: NFER-Nelson, pp: 93-105.
- Bachman, I.F., & A.S. Palmer, 1996. *Language testing in practice: Designing and developing useful language tests*. Oxford: OUP.
- Baker, E.L., 1991. *Alternative assessment and national policy*, paper presented at National Research Symposium on Limited English Proficient Students' Issues: Focus on Evaluation and Measurement, Washington, DC.
- Bray, M., & L. Steward, (Eds.) 1998. Examination systems in small states: Comparative perspectives on policies, models and operations. London: Commonwealth Secretariat.
- Cheng, L., 1998. Impact of public English examination change on students' perceptions and attitudes toward their English learning. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 24(3): 279-301.
- Cheng, L., 2004. The washback effect of a public examination change on teachers' perceptions toward their classroom teaching. In L. Cheng, Y. Watanabe, & A. Curtis (Eds.), *Washback in language testing: Research contexts and methods* (pp. 146-170). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Davies, A., 1985. Follow my leader: Is that what language tests do? In Y. P. Lee, C. Y. Y. Fok, R. Lord, & G. Low (Eds.), *New directions in language testing* (pp. 1-12). Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Eckstein, M.A. & H.J. Noah, (Eds). 1992. *Examinations: Comparative and international studies*, Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Frederiksen, J.R. & A. Collins, 1989. A system approach to educational testing, *Educational Researcher*, 18 (9): 27-32.
- Geisinger, K.F., 1994. Cross-cultural normative assessment: Translation and adaptation issues influencing the normative interpretation of assessment instruments, *Psychological Assessment*, 6: 304-312.
- Haladyna, T.M., S.B. Nolen, & N.S. Haas, 1991. Raising standardized achievement test scores and the origins of test score pollution, *Educational Research*, 20(5): 2-7.
- Kamyab, S., 2009. Junior colleges in the Islamic Republic of Iran. In (Eds.) *Community College Models*, VI, 561-568. Springer.
- Linn, R.L., 2000. Assessments and accountability. *Educational Researcher*, 29(2): 4-16.
- Messick, S., 1989. Validity. In R. Linn (Ed.), *Educational Measurement* (pp. 13-103). New York: Macmillan.
- Messick, S., 1996. Validity and washback in language testing. *Language Testing*, 13: 241- 256.
- Morrow, K.E., 1986. The evaluation of tests of communicative performance. In M. Portal (Ed.), *Innovations in language testing*. London: NFER/Nelson [-21-].
- Petrie, H.G., 1987. Introduction to evaluation and testing, *Educational Policy*, 1: 175-180.
- Popham, W.J., 1987. The merits of measurement-driven instruction. *Phi Delta Kappa*, 68: 679-682.
- Shepard, L.A., 1993. The place of testing reform in education reform: A reply to Cizek, *Educational Researcher*, 22(4): 10-14.
- Wall, D., 1997. Impact and washback in language testing. In C. Clapham & D. Corson (Eds), *Encyclopedia of language and education: Vol. 7. Language testing and assessment* (pp. 291-302). Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic.
- Wideen, M.F., T. O'Shea, I. Pye, & G. Ivany, 1997. High-stakes testing and the teaching of science. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 22: 428-444.

Appendix A

Washback of High-stakes Tests on the Parents: Case of Entrance Exam of Universities (EEU) in Iran:

Dear Parent,

This study aims to investigate the washback effect of the EEU on the Iranian parents. 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) Are you ...?

Female	
Male	

(2) What is your level of education?

Diploma	
BSc/BA	
MSc/MA	
PhD	

(3) How often do you visit the school in which your child is studying?

Almost once a week	
Almost twice a month	
Almost once a month	
Almost once in a semester	

(4) How many sessions of weekly private tutorials do you consider for your child to prepare himself or herself for the coming EEU?

None	
Once or twice	
Three or four times	
More than five times	

PART TWO: Please tick the right answer.

(1) How often do you do the following at home?

Statements	Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Always
Talk to your child about the importance of the EEU					
Provide a suitable environment for your child to study for the EEU					
Motivate your child to study for the EEU					
Help him/her indirectly to pass the EEU					
Provide him/her with supplementary materials					
Turn off the radio/TV for his/her sake					
Remind him/her of the EEU date					
Encourage your child to be aware of the EEU					
Keep the house environment calm					

(2) How do you agree with the following opinions?

Statements	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly agree
Most of the students dislike EEU.					
Students' learning is improved by practicing mock exam papers of the EEU.					
Taking EEU is a valuable learning experience.					
EEU forces students to study harder.					
EEU has an important effect on student self-image.					
A student's score on the EEU is a good indication of how well she or he has learned the material.					
EEU should NOT be used as the sole criterion for admission into tertiary education.					
Students perform better in EEU situation rather than in normal teaching situation.					
Mock examinations are important ways to learn.					
Most of the students work hard to achieve their best in the EEU.					
EEU is one of the motivations for students' learning.					