

## ORIGINAL ARTICLES

### University Entrance Exam in Iran: A bridge or a dam

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#### ABSTRACT

The term washback refers to the power of high-stakes tests on language teaching and learning. In this study the washback effect of the university entrance exam (UEE) in Iran is explored. The results of this national test can be perceived by all its stakeholders including the teachers, students, parents, policy makers, publishers and etc. The UEE, considered as the sole criterion for admission into tertiary education, is a 4-hour multiple-choice test regarding most of the core courses that the high school graduates have been taught during a period of four years study in high school. Although this test has been administered for more than four decades, different changes have been made in its content and format of administration. However, some critics firmly believe that the UEE needs to be either thoroughly revised or totally eliminated. At the present time, the suggestion of eliminating the UEE is not practical because a specified method of selecting eligible graduate high school students has not been introduced by the policy makers. This paper aims to address the washback effect of the university entrance exam in Iran and briefly reviews its effects on the Iranian high school English teachers, students and their families. The necessity of conducting research studies on the stakeholders of the UEE to know their perceptions of this high-stakes exam seems apparent. Two possible practical solutions are finally suggested to be used as the selection methods in case of eliminating the UEE.

**Key words:** University Entrance Exam (UEE), Washback, Perception, High-stakes test, Stakeholder

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#### Introduction

Alderson and Wall (1993) defined washback as the effect of high-stakes tests on the process of teaching and learning. High-stakes tests also refer to the tests whose results are seen by students, teachers, administrators, parents, or the general public as the basis upon which important decisions are made that immediately and directly affect them (Qi, 2004). The investigation of the washback effect of high-stakes tests at the national level has been the common point among several research studies (see, for example, Wall and Alderson, 1993; Cheng 2004, 2005; Alderson and Wall, 1996; Wall, 2000; Watanabe, 2004; Hawkey, 2006; Green, 2007; and Mizutani, 2009). However, one gap that emerges in the washback literature is that little research has examined the washback of tests on learning and teaching, in contrast to the attention paid to the washback on the content and syllabus design (Wall, 2000; Watanabe, 2004). In addition, according to Green (2007), previous research studies have generated various findings on the washback of tests on teaching and learning – an indication that washback is inextricably linked to the social and educational contexts in which a test is administered and that washback varies from person to person. Therefore, any given test needs research tailor-made to examine its washback.

Empirical washback studies have usually involved investigating the effect of testing on aspects of educational systems. Hughes (1993) draws a useful distinction between the effects on participants, processes and outcomes. The influence of a test on participants (the teachers, learners and materials writers preparing for a test and the perceptions and attitudes they bring to the task), leads them to modify their processes (teaching and learning behaviors) and these in turn impact on products (learning outcomes including knowledge of target skills and test scores). Although the effects of high-stakes tests on educational outcomes and the interpretability of test scores have been central questions in the general education literature (see, for example, Cheng, 2004; Mizutani, 2009), products have attracted relatively little attention from language testing researchers. No previous washback study has linked together test design, participant, process and product variables to trace the influence of a language test through teaching and learning processes to test score outcomes.

#### *University Entrance Exam in Iran:*

The importance of university entrance exam (UEE) in Iran cannot be denied because it is a criterion for admission into higher education and it supports the processes of self-evaluation and improvement of educational

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institutions. There has been intensive work by the Ministry of Education (ME), Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT), Education Evaluation Organization (the organization that is in charge of administering UEE annually), as well as non-governmental organizations in large and smaller towns to inform the high schools, pre-university centers, teachers, students, parents, publishers, and the community in general about the importance of this test administration and its implications.

The UEE in Iran has been the sole criterion for admission into higher education for nearly four decades. This national test covers most of the courses that the students have been taught during a period of four years study in high school and pre-university center. This multiple-choice exam 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 react to the questions. The first six or seven items are on 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 1 summarizes the types of items in recent English subset of UEE.

**Table 1:** English Test Item Types

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

Out of the 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 global understanding, 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 that require general understanding of short texts, as well as inference making of specific passages.

Some Iranian students frequently complain that their English listening, speaking, and writing skills are poor. However, they seldom complain about knowing grammatical points. Why? Generally, most English language teachers and researchers consider that the four skills, i.e., listening, speaking, reading and writing should be equally developed for a high school and pre-university student, but listening and speaking skills are not covered in the UEE at all, and writing subset only covers a small section in the UEE. Why do not listening, speaking and writing skills have any role in EEOU if we say that all of the skills are equally important to high school and pre-university students?

On the other hand, many Iranian language researchers and educators have assumed various levels of washback impact on English instruction. Despite numerous studies regarding the testing impact on English as a foreign language teaching and learning being of different contexts, empirical research is still lacking on the perceptions of the UEE stakeholders about the washback effect of this high-stakes test on English teaching and learning in Iran. Thus, there is a need to investigate the nature and scope of the UEE washback effect on English learning and teaching in Iranian high schools based upon the perceptions of teachers, students and even the parents.

#### *Educational System in Iran:*

Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, the educational system of the country has gone under qualitative and quantitative changes. In fact, 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. The structure of the education system in Iran is basically divided into five phases namely, pre-school, primary, middle (or guidance), secondary and post-secondary (tertiary). There are qualifying examinations to pass from one educational phase to the next and national exams are conducted at the end of each grade of the secondary phase.

*UEE Crisis in Iran:*

In June each year, high school graduates in Iran take the stringent, centralized nationwide university entrance exam seeking a place in one of the public universities. The competition is fierce, the exam content rigorous, and the seats at universities are limited. In recent years, although the government has responded to the demands for improved access and to a rapid increase in the rising number of applicants by enlarging the capacity of universities and creating Open University, state universities are still only able to accept 10 percent of all the applicants (Kamyab, 2009).

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). Hence, the phenomenon of the university entrance exam has caused discontent and conflict. There is a fierce competition among high-school graduates in Iran to pass this centralized nationwide university entrance exam. The Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) has set up the Education Evaluation Organization (EEO) to take care of all aspects of this major exam. Every year the EEO manages to select almost 150,000 students to enter universities out of 1.5 million high school graduates participating in a tough 4.5- hour multiple-choice exam. A few weeks after the big exam day, each participant receives a score sheet, and a list of Field-Department-University (FDU), displaying each field of study in the universities, departments along with their capacity for that year (e.g., the Software Engineering field of Computer Engineering department at Tehran University). The eligible participants (those who have scored enough to be allowed to declare their FDU priorities) fill out a priority indication form, and declare the FDUs they like to enter, in the order of their preference. The EEO processes the forms, and considering the total score, the participant's FDU priority list, and some other selection rules, enters the accepted participants' names in the list of each FDU, until all capacities are exhausted. Those who are not entered in a list are considered failed and may try again next year. Each accepted participant's name can only be entered in one list.

*UEE Washback Effect:*

The washback effect of a test can be positive or negative. Positive washback refers to the expected test effects. For instance, IELTS may encourage language learners to study more or may promote a connection between standards and instruction. Negative washback, on the other hand, refers to the unexpected and harmful consequences of a test (Bailey, 1996). For example, the UEE may force both teachers and learners to focus too heavily on test preparation at the expense of other activities.

According to Kamyab (2009), UEE, especially in recent years, has further contributed to the massive brain drain from Iran and has created psychological and social problems such as anxiety, boredom, and hopelessness among the youths who fail the test. As in many other countries where only a long multiple-choice, mostly memory-based exam is used to select qualified applicants to enter universities, Iranian schools have been turned into factories for exam cramming. In a study on the washback effects of the entrance exam of the universities on the Iranian high school teachers and students, Salehi et al. (2009) concluded that most of the parents talk to their children about the importance of the UEE and provide them a suitable environment to study better. A group of parents even turn off radio and TV at home for their children's sake and remind them of the UEE date. Parents also believe that their children can be more successful in the society if they pass this major exam. Therefore, they directly or indirectly make their children anxious.

Mohammadi (2010) also concluded that the disadvantages of this entrance exam outweigh its advantages. First, the conditions of this exam make the students and their families stressful. Second, if the students do not perform well on the exam, they may lose their motivation. In fact, this major exam motivates students to study hard but when they are not successful, they will be demotivated and frustrated. Third, since this exam is a competitive exam in nature, the students may compete with each other negatively during the time before the exam administration.

*Conclusion:*

It is surprising that a limited number of studies have been carried out assessing the effects of UEE on the stakeholders of this exam. This is maybe due to the complexity of washback phenomenon. Anyway, it seems necessary to conduct different researches on the various aspects of this competitive exam to determine its major shortcomings. As the UEE crisis persists, a group of critics believe that these drawbacks should be eliminated from the test whereas some other authorities are contemplating a replacement mechanism for the student selection. Based on the conclusions drawn from the larger part of this study, we suggest the two following possible practical solutions as the selection methods in case of eliminating the UEE:

The students' cumulative grade-point average (GPA) of the final four years of high school can be used to admit them to the state universities. While this policy seems more humanistic and fair than using a single exam

to measure students' preparedness, it still cannot ensure fairness or reveal students' aptitude for further learning. Perhaps incorporating interviews, essay writing, and aptitude tests, in addition to GPA would be a more effective way of measuring students' qualifications to enter universities.

The university should be open to the public as it is common in Europe and western countries. Instead, graduation should be hard enough to force students pay more attention to the quality of learning. In fact, the students should enter the university very easily but there should be some strict regulations for graduation from the universities. For example, the first semester in the universities can be determinant. If the students had satisfactory performance, they would be eligible to continue or select other fields of study.

The results of this study might be of use to three groups of people: (a) at the micro level, to teachers and students, as the two elements of teaching and learning process, (b) at the macro level, to the UEE developers and administrators, curriculum designers as well as policy makers who are, according to Bachman and Palmer (1996, p. 34), "all concerned about the impact of testing on the educational system and society", and (c) to the researchers in the field, especially those who are more concerned with providing empirical support for washback phenomenon.

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