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## Research Paper

### Washback Effect of EPT on Iranian PhD Candidates' Attitudes Toward Learning Materials

Golnaz Jamalifar<sup>1</sup>, Hadi Salehi<sup>2\*</sup>, Omid Tabatabaei<sup>3</sup>, Manoochehr Jafarigohar<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>PhD Student of TEFL, English Department, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran

*golnazjamalifar@shu.iaun.ac.ir*

<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, English Department, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran (Corresponding Author)

*hadisalehi1358@phu.iaun.ac.ir*

<sup>3</sup>Associate Professor, English Department, Najafabad Branch, Islamic Azad University, Najafabad, Iran

*tabatabaeiomid@phu.iaun.ac.ir*

<sup>4</sup>Associate Professor, Department of TEFL and English Literature, Payame Noor University

*jafari@pnu.ac.ir*

## Abstract

Washback or backwash, used similarly, has been defined as the impact of testing on curriculum design, teaching practice, and learning behaviors. Iranian PhD candidates' performance on this exam is required to pursue PhD study; therefore, degrees of washback both at the micro and macro levels are at stake. Despite the importance of this exam for the candidates, it seems that studies on washback and specifically washback effect of EPT on Iranian PhD candidates' learning materials has not been given adequate attention in Iran. Given this, the present study attempts to examine the washback effect of EPT on Iranian PhD candidates' learning materials. Based on sequential design, two phases of data collection were conducted with a two-week interval. In the first phase, attitude questionnaire was administered to 200 Iranian PhD candidates



at Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) branch. In the second phase of the study, 20 Iranian PhD candidates were interviewed. Finally, the collected data from both the questionnaires and the interviews were analyzed via quantitative and descriptive analysis, respectively. The results of the study revealed both positive and negative washback impacts on learning materials. The findings of the study have practical implications for language teachers in general, and EFL language teachers, syllabus designers, and material developers in particular.

**Keywords:** *Washback, English Proficiency Test (EPT), Learning Materials, PhD Candidates*

### Introduction

The washback or backwash, as has been used interchangeably, is a well-researched academic concept common to nearly all institutional learning processes. As Gates (1995) defined, it is the influence of testing on teaching and learning. In much the same vein, McKinley and Thompson (2018) defined washback as “the impact of testing on curriculum design, teaching practices, and learning behaviors” (p.1). Shohamy (1993) also defined the concept as “the impact that tests have on teaching and learning” (P. 4). Maybe it is a reminder to all; this statement from our school days: “will this be in the exam, teacher?” we have been meaning washback effect. Bailey (1996) referred to washback as the natural tendency of teachers and students to set their classroom activities based on test requirements especially when the test is going to be really important to the future of students. Washback, though, is not limited to learners and teachers. It also addresses the test impact on society, educational systems and individuals (Backman & Palmer, 1996). According to the Palmer and Backman (1996), test impacts operate at two levels: the micro level by which it means the effect of test on individual students and teachers, and the macro level that is the impact of the test on society, or educational system.

Washback as a viable tool for professional language testing has been integrated in L2 assessment to offer practical solutions to common obstacles and dilemmas in a specific teaching/learning context (Indrawati, 2018). In this connection, it is often argued that through application of washback studies a test designer might become more apprehensive of ‘problematizing’ a particular practice and be more explicit in naming a problem (Ghorbani, Samad, & Gani, 2008). Noteworthy, washback studies can provide invaluable opportunities to assist teachers, exam developers, and material developers to problematize through a deep reflection on processes, challenges, and outcomes of exams.

As Alderson and Hamp-lyons (1996) mentioned, most studies of washback have been devoted to teachers’ perspective. It can be argued that there are some aspects that are less researched (e.g., washback effect and learning materials). Regarding the scarcity of the research in the field, this study was felt crucial to be carried out since it aims at investigating the washback effect of EPT on Iranian PhD candidates’ learning materials. As Wall (2003, as cited in Ahmadi Safa & Goodarzi, 2014) stated, many washback studies do not go for learning outcomes. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct research studies on washback of exams affecting learning outcomes.

### Washback and Learning Materials

Textbooks play a fundamental role in any educational system. Language teaching rarely happens in an institution or high school without a textbook. The two are closely tied together. They seem to pave the way for language learning to take place (Brown, 2001). The pivotal role of

materials in any teaching and learning environment and the importance of coursebooks can hardly be underestimated. As underlined by Lamie (2004), despite the development of new technologies allowing for higher quality teacher-generated materials, demand for textbooks continues to grow, and the publishing industry responds with periodic promotion of new series and textbooks.

According to Tomlinson and Masuhara (2017), instructional materials, also known as Teaching/Learning Materials (TLM) can be defined as the collection of materials including any living and solid objects and human and non-human resources that a teacher apply in teaching process and learning situations facilitate fulfillment of learning outcomes. Tomlinson (1998) mentioned that "anything which is used by teachers or learners to facilitate the learning of a language is regarded material" (P. 2). Crawford (2002) stated the possibility of classifying materials based on purpose, format, and creator. Based on purpose, it can be instructional or authentic. Based on format, it can be audiovisual, paper-based or electronic. And by creator, it is meant commercial or in-house creators.

As Cheng and Watanabe (2004) stated, the convincing evidence is that high-stakes tests have powerful washback effect on teaching and learning in different educational contexts. In this study where EPT is a high-stakes test, it is perhaps going to exert a great washback effect on Iranian PhD candidates' learning materials. EPT, as a high-stakes test, attracts a great number of Iranian PhD candidates each year. In this research context where candidates have passed at least 7 credits of English language at university level to be accredited to continue their studies in program and have gained the so-called satisfactory results, it is expected to pass EPT with no trouble.

When talking about EPT status, it is clear that all Iranian PhD candidates studying at different branches of Islamic Azad Universities all around the country need to have the acceptance score to be able to finish their studies. It is a shared experience for every one going to book shops seeing heavy rows of books related to EPT. This indicates the importance of the learning materials used for EPT among Iranian PhD candidates. The problem raised here for perhaps any Iranian PhD candidate studying at Islamic Azad University is what types of materials he/she should purchase. What kinds of materials are more beneficial to his/her purpose of exam participation. Given this, the present study aims to determine the washback effect of EPT on Iranian PhD candidates' learning materials. In line with the main research objective, the following research question was proposed:

### **Research Question**

What kind of washback effect does EPT exert on Iranian PhD candidates' learning materials?

### **Review of Literature**

Salehi and Yunes (2012) studied the washback effects on Iranian University Entrance Exam (IUEE). To fulfill the objectives of this study, a validated survey questionnaire was distributed among 132 high school English teachers of five main educational districts in the city of Isfahan, Iran, using stratified random sampling. The data analysis showed that IUEE had a negative effect on English teachers with regard to the material and structure of the test. Furthermore, no enough consideration were given to speaking, writing, and listening skills as these skills are not assessed in the IUEE.

In a qualitative study, Rezvani and Sayyadi (2014) studied the washback effect of entrance exam on the applicants' study plans and strategies from the viewpoints of Iranian university

instructors and the applicants. To fulfill the objectives of this study, they run in-depth interviews with 10 experienced TEFL instructors from four different universities as well as 10 applicants who took both the old and new entrance exams. The study results indicated that both instructors and applicants believed that the new exam has generated confusion with regard to the technical content covered. Moreover, instructors reported that, the new exam has induced the applicants to develop exam-oriented strategies, instead of more demanding cognitive skills as a prerequisite of target program courses.

Ramezaney (2014) examined the effect of university entrance exam (UEE) on Iranian EFL teachers' curricular planning and instruction techniques. To do so, 365 Iranian EFL teachers in Tehran were selected as the sample. Standardized and validated questionnaires and group interviews were applied to elicit the data. The analysis methods included descriptive statistical procedures and data description. The findings revealed that UEE plays a significant role on teachers' curricular planning and instruction techniques. Moreover, the obtained results underscore the importance of in-service professional teacher training programs, and the inclusion of more performance-based assessment modes to the UEE.

Birjandi and Taqizadeh (2015) examined the effect of washback in university entrance exam. It is generally believed that the university entrance examination (UEE) in Iran has an authority over the whole educational process in high schools, covering the practice of EFL and negative washback effect of the test. However, these arguments have not been tested empirically. Thus, this study made an attempt to shed light on the issue with reference to high school English teachers. To this end, ten English classrooms were observed for two sessions as to get insights into the classroom atmosphere, and the effect of UEE on teachers. Besides, to explore teachers' beliefs regarding the token approaches in teaching, thirteen teachers were interviewed. Classroom observations indicated that grammar-translation method dominates methodology in all classrooms. The interviews also suggested that UEE motives teachers in their language classrooms. However, it is suggested to replicate the study with more teachers and longitudinal observations of their classrooms.

Hsiao (2018) probed the washback effects of an intensive test-preparation program (ITPP) on non-English major students and their learning strategies, and the relationship between students' test performance and washback effects. The participants included an experimental group consisted of 52 learners and a control group of 60 non-English majors recruited from a national university. The students in the experimental group attended a five-week ITPP, focusing on promoting students' reading and listening skills, while the control group students did not receive any treatment. The three instruments for data collection were questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and students' scores from Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). The results revealed that the two groups are statistically different in terms of motivation. In addition, three out of sixteen learning strategies varied significantly between the two groups including taking mock tests, reading newspapers, articles and magazines, and learning through English websites. However, there was not any significant relationship between students' test performance and washback effects.

Pakzad and Salehi (2018) investigated the washback effect of TEFL M.A UEE on Iranian lecturers' classroom activities through integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Data were collected in two phases with a two-week interval. The first phase consisted of a valid and reliable researcher-made questionnaire administered to 16 Iranian university lecturers; and the second phase was made up of the interview administered to five lecturers. To this end, an interview protocol was developed and the validity and reliability of this protocol was

measured. The findings indicated that TEFL MA did not play an important role on washback effect of lecturers' classroom activities and their teaching methodology.

Saglam and Fardahy (2019) examined the washback effect of an English language proficiency test administrated in universities in Turkey for English for Academic Purposes. Enjoying a mixed method of data collection, they found that the test had both positive and negative washback effect on learning; positive in that the test made learners more aware as university students could generate, organize and link ideas, use vocabulary and structure better and negative in a way that they had to limit themselves with test and its orientation.

The impact of EPT on candidates' language learning materials is what makes this study prominent. Language learning materials, to be specific, EPT preparatory courses, classes, textbooks, CDs and other materials are abundant. But is it a reality that EPT affects the type, format, and presentation of the materials selected by candidates? Or is it a myth?

## Method

### Participants and Setting

In order to conduct this study, 200 male and female Iranian PhD candidates, aged 24-44, were selected through convenience sampling from Islamic Azad University, Isfahan Branch. In order to take a sample of diverse range of participants, the head of the faculties of the university were the main informing tool. Those PhD candidates who had expressed their willingness to participate in this study were shortly briefed. In order to eliminate or at least minimize threats to internal validity, the participants' demographic information was ascertained through a demographic form which data about age, academic background, and teaching/learning experience were gathered. Through this, those participants who had been previously majored in English language related fields were excluded. Next, in order to endure the participants' voluntary contributions, the consent forms were distributed. After careful analysis of the demographic forms, those eligible Iranian PhD candidates who could fulfill the requirements of the study were selected. Moreover, to the researcher's chagrin, those inattentive participants who did not fully cooperate were omitted from the final cohort. Therefore, the final sample consisted of only 200 Iranian PhD candidates from different faculties of Islamic Azad University, Isfahan Branch.

### Instruments

#### Attitude Questionnaire

The researcher developed and validated a questionnaire for the purpose of investigating the effect of language learners' attitude in helping and developing learning materials and curriculum planning. The first version of the questionnaire, before validation and at the stage of planning, consisted of 40 items. Later, it was analyzed and, based on experts' opinion, the version reduced to 55 items. Later again, the revised version was distributed among 5 experts and the final version that was used in this study was consisted of only 28 items. The questionnaire was made up of three parts. The first part of the questionnaire was consisted of questions such as personal information, economic information, educational background of father, mother and the participator, gender, age, academic background, field of study at university, the number of semesters passed at the university, marital status, job status and type, and the many other questions that can be investigated thoroughly by looking at the questionnaire attached in appendix. The second part was aimed at understanding the progress that Iranian PhD candidates have made as a result of participating in EPT classes. Finally, the last part was consisted of questions that were eliciting participants' level of agreement toward the statements.

Fifty male and female Iranian PhD candidates in the pilot study were asked to indicate items or questions in the questionnaire which deemed ambiguous. Based on the feedbacks received, some minor modifications were made in the wording of some of the questions so that they seem less technical. The main data were elicited from the Iranian PhD candidates studying at Isfahan (Khoragsan) branch.

### **Semi-Structured Interview**

The participants' perceptions of language learning materials were inquired formally through semi-structured interview before and after EPT exam. Some participants had already participated in EPT at the time of the interview and some others did not have any experience about EPT. The interview was conducted in Persian. It was a semi-structured, open-ended format that lasted for about 15 minutes.

### **Procedure**

Initially, in order to conduct this study, 230 male and female Iranian PhD candidates, aged 24-44, were selected through convenience sampling from Islamic Azad University, Isfahan Branch. Next, having analyzed the demographic forms of the participants, those eligible Iranian PhD candidates who could fulfill the requirements of the study were selected. Given this, the final cohort consisted of only 200 Iranian PhD candidates from different faculties of Islamic Azad University, Isfahan Branch.

Having collected the signed consent forms, attitude questionnaire was distributed on pre-set dates among Iranian PhD candidates. The participants filled out the questionnaire and returned it back to the researcher who was available at the time of data collection. At the time of questionnaire distribution, all the participants were asked to write down their phone numbers if they were all willing to take part in the interview section and writing their learning diaries. Based on the purpose of this study, only 1 tenth of the participants (about 20 people) were sufficient for the interview part. Thirty-one Iranian PhD candidates expressed their willingness to be interviewed, but when the researcher was calling them or setting dates with them to be available in person or even on the phone, some of whom were not willing to help the researcher. Finally, 20 Iranian PhD candidates agreed to be interviewed and expressed their agreement for a 15-minute person to person interview. At the time of interview, a trained colleague was helping the researcher by writing down the field notes, and the researcher herself was writing down the interview that was happening.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

The research question of the study asked "What kind of washback effect, does EPT exert on Iranian PhD candidates' learning materials?" The data needed to answer this research question were collected from the questionnaire on materials, and the results of the analyses are presented in what follows.

**Table 1***Washback Effect of EPT Regarding the Progress Made Due to the Course Objectives*

No	Statements	Frequency / Percentage	None	Little	Some	Much	Very Much	Mean
1	Gaining knowledge of language learning strategies, and language proficiency	Frequency Percentage	14	27	34	51	69	3.68
2	Gaining an understanding of theories of language learning, fundamental concepts in language learning, or other important issues in case of language learning	Frequency Percentage	124	46	22	0	0	1.47
3	Learning to understand professional/scholarly research papers in English language through the knowledge gained from EPT	Frequency Percentage	28	41	51	49	26	3.02
4	Learning to translate/interpret primary texts or works in my field of study	Frequency Percentage	17	38	81	43	16	3.01
5	Developing skill in critical thinking	Frequency Percentage	32	39	45	49	30	3.03
6	Developing skill in problem solving	Frequency Percentage	8	22	56	66	43	3.58
7	Developing skill in learning new English vocabulary	Frequency Percentage	13	27	61	59	65	3.60
8	Developing creative capacities	Frequency Percentage	23	38	58	47	29	3.10

9	Learning techniques and methods for gaining new knowledge in English language learning	Frequency Percentage	14	33	54	62	32	3.33
10	Developing the ability to conceive and carry out independent language learning	Frequency Percentage	26	32	49	67	21	3.12
11	Developing the ability to work collaboratively with others	Frequency Percentage	38	42	68	35	12	2.69
12	Developing skill in expressing ideas in English language orally	Frequency Percentage	41	39	52	33	30	2.85
13	Developing skill in expressing myself in English language	Frequency Percentage	32	27	61	46	29	3.06
14	Developing specific skills or competencies, such as reading proficiency, text interpretation or translation in my field of study, gaining advantage for my CV, gaining skill to have English language presentations in English language, learning the ability of writing my thesis abstract in English	Frequency Percentage	16	34	69	58	22	3.18
15	Gaining an understanding of the relevance of the EPT to real-world use of English	Frequency Percentage	46	39	52	41	17	2.71

language for me as a Ph.D. candidate									
16	Gaining an understanding of the importance of language learning for a Ph.D. candidate	Frequency Percentage	11	37	63	56	28	3.27	
17	Gaining an understanding of different language learning strategies which are necessary for language learning	Frequency Percentage	23	37	40	52	43	3.28	
18	Discovering the implications of EPT learning material for a better participation in EPT	Frequency Percentage	10	26	46	69	44	3.56	

The items in the questionnaire displayed above had mean scores ranging from the lows of 1.47 (item # 2), 2.69 (item # 11), 2.71 (item # 15), and 2.85 (item # 12) to the highs of 3.60 (item # 7), 3.58 (item # 6), and 3.56 (item # 18). In the aforementioned lower-than-average items, the Ph.D. students believed respectively that (a) they did not gain an understanding of theories of language learning, fundamental concepts in language learning, or other important issues in the area of language learning, (b) they did not develop the ability to work collaboratively with others, (c) they did not gain an understanding of the relevance of the EPT to real-world use of English language, and (d) they did not develop skills in expressing ideas in English language orally. On the other hand, via the above-than-average items just mentioned, the Ph.D. students held that (a) they developed skills in learning new English vocabulary, (b) they developed skills in problem solving, and (c) they could discover the implications of EPT learning materials for a better participation in EPT. The overall significance or non-significance of the results obtained for the effects of EPT regarding the progress Ph.D. students made in relation to course objectives is determined in the one-sample *t* test table below:

**Table 2**

*One-sample t Test Results for Washback Effect of EPT Regarding the Progress Students Made*

Test Value = 3						
<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Overall Mean	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
				Lower	Upper	
.73	17	3.08	.47	-.16	.33	

The results of the one-sample *t* test analysis reveals that the overall mean score for the washback of EPT on the students' progress was slightly larger than average ( $M = 3.08$ ), but this overall positive effect failed to reach a significant extent ( $p < .05$ ). The results for washback effects of EPT on learning materials are provided in the following table:

**Table 3**  
*Washback Effect of EPT on Learning Materials*

No	Statements	Frequen cy / Percent age	Stron gly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Mean
19	I really wanted to take a course from a specific EPT instructor because he is expert in the field.	Frequen cy Percenta ge	10	23	57	67	38	2.48
20	I would like to take another course from this EPT instructor.	Frequen cy Percenta ge	49	55	36	34	21	3.39
21	Overall, I rate this instructor an excellent EPT teacher.	Frequen cy Percenta ge	37	56	44	26	32	3.20
22	I really wanted to take EPT course, regardless of who taught it.	Frequen cy Percenta ge	40	52	48	35	20	3.29
23	As a result of taking this course, I have a new or increased interest in English language and English language learning.	Frequen cy Percenta ge	25	46	62	40	22	3.06

24	I put considerable effort into EPT preparatory learning materials.	Frequency	63	55	42	28	7	3.71
25	I had an adequate background for EPT	Frequency	16	33	44	61	41	2.60
26	Overall, I rate the EPT learning materials that I have read as very good.	Frequency	12	22	43	64	54	2.35
27	Overall, I learned a great deal of English language through EPT learning materials available.	Frequency	41	53	27	55	19	3.21
28	Please indicate if EPT fits into your educational program during your Ph.D. journey.	Frequency	16	37	69	45	28	2.83

In this section of the questionnaire, four items (items # 26, 19, 25, and 28) features mean scores lower than average. Through these items, the PhD. students showed their disagreement with the ideas that (a) they rate the EPT materials they read as very good, (b) they really wanted to take a course from a specific ESP instructor because s/he was an expert in the field, (c) they had an adequate backgrounds in EPT, and (d) EPT fit into their educational program during their PhD. studies.

However, in items featuring the highest mean scores in this part of the questionnaire (items # 24, 20, and 22), the students agreed that (a) they would put considerable effort into EPT preparatory learning materials, (b) they would like to take another course with their EPT instructor, and (c) they really wanted to take the EPT course, regardless of who taught it. All in all, the students' overall beliefs towards the washback effect of EPT on learning materials were positive as the overall mean score for this part of the questionnaire equalled 3.01, but this positive attitude was not of statistical significance as  $p$  equalled .93 in the one-sample  $t$  test analysis presented in the table below:

**Table 4**  
*One-sample t Test Results*

Test Value = 3		Overall Mean	Sig. (2-tailed)	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>			Lower	Upper
.08	9	3.01	.93	-.29	.32

There was only one other item in this part of the questionnaire, the results of which are presented here because its options were different from those of the other items. This single item reads: *Please indicate any other reason(s) you had for taking this course (choose all that apply)* (a) Curiosity, (b) Recommendation of student or faculty member, (c) Acquisition of particular skills in language learning, (d) Graduate requirement for my PhD., and (e) Prerequisite for another course in my PhD. Nearly all of the respondents ticked the fourth option (*requirement for their PhD*).

### Qualitative Data Analysis

In term of language learning materials, the participants began using any material which was used by teachers or learners to facilitate the learning of a language. The learning materials were instructional or authentic, audiovisual, paper-based or electronic. Sometimes they even reported the use of house created materials. By house created materials the participants meant what their friends made previous years to practice for EPT preparation.

*I felt English language learning materials available for EPT Were tricky and challenging. As a postgraduate student, it put a great pressure on me to get prepared for another challenge during my Ph.D. I mean, Challenge of EPT. However, now, in spite of not having a good time management, I believe, it is more convenient if we all know how to study English language and what type of materials to buy. (Participant L, Interview)*

For most of the participants, the nature of EPT seemed so complicated. However, some participants found it relatively more manageable only when they began finding the right type of materials.

*Firstly, I found it difficult to grasp the purpose of reading comprehension section, but it became clear when I started reading the reading TOEFL Reading Flash. It is in the doing that it starts to make sense. (Participant M, Interview)*

*I found it much easier when I started reading my texts. It was believe me because of the books I found. (Participant N, Interview)*

*The EPT learning materials look like something which they we as participants are to come across in the exam. It also has the same, similar length to the grammar or vocabulary they come across in the exam. Therefore, it provides a high motivational value to the students and I find that they're more receptive to supplementary materials. Whereas the EPT books that I use texts are generally short, and readings are generally shorter and they are of a high level. (Participant, S, Interview)*

*"If we didn't have supplementary materials for the grammar part of EPT, I would be lost. I need to trace materials for all parts of my EPT, and materials developers should take care of the issue that we are not students of English language. We have different backgrounds in English language. (Participant J, Interview)*

## Discussion

This study has shown that EPT has the power to narrow down the content in the curriculum. It can be stated that EPT has exerted a negative washback effect on the curriculum and this is in agreement with Alderson and Wall's (2003) statements regarding the power of exams on changing learning principles or learning objectives. According to the answers provided on the questionnaires, it became clear that only 2.5 percent of the candidates have announced having a good level in the speaking skill. This is because of lack of inclusion of speaking related contents in the curriculum. This is also true with the writing skill of the participants because only 5 percent have named themselves as good writers in English language. The interesting point is that 50 percent of all of those candidates have participated in extracurricular language classes and still grapple with problem of weak productive skills. According to the results of the study, it was confirmed that students have shown special attention to reading comprehension and less to speaking and writing. This is perhaps because of lack of inclusion of aforementioned skills in the exam. This has been proven in Allen (2016) study that those who were preparing for IELTS were regarding listening skill a more important skill in comparison to other skills and they tried harder for it. The results of interview in Allen (2016) also showed that there are various reason to this such as learners' sociocultural and learners' educational context. In Iran, from the very beginning, students learn English language as a language with vocabulary, structure and reading comprehension, so it seems natural that they are to be tested based on such components on EPT.

From Alderson and Wall's (2003) statements, it can be argued that an exam can have a positive washback effect in the case of existing a definite content which has been taught in the classroom context. When the researcher analyzed the EPT materials that was handy to the Iranian PhD candidates, it became clear that all the contents have been covered, meaning a positive washback effect.

Hatipoglu (2010) concluded that curriculum developers, exam writers, and administrators have found a way to let an exam exert its positive effect on teaching and learning. Therefore, in line with current shift of interest, material developers, in developing EPT materials, have relied heavily on effective syllabi in their materials. Saglam (2018) who analyzed the effect of a locally produced theme-based high-stake English language proficiency in tertiary education, stated that the exam did not have a positive effect on the learning materials and this statement is in line with the results of this study.

Another issue that was raised by Khanshan (2018) was that textbooks are at an appropriate level of difficulty, and Iranian PhD candidates in this study had a similar feeling regarding the level of the textbooks in the materials. In contrast, 79 percent of the Iranian PhD candidates stated that course books were not affective in improving their English language since they are replaced with unfamiliar, uninteresting topics, and topics are conceptually difficult. They claimed that it is not in agreement with their levels. Iranian PhD candidates also stated that the commercial course books were not closely aligned with the test content and their views were reflected in their interviews. Hoque (2011) found that HSC examinations have had a negative washback effect on the classroom teaching, syllabus, curriculum, teaching content, methodology, and learning. The finding of the study showed there is a heavy reliance on test preparation materials such as test papers, past questions, and model questions. This is exactly the reason behind the available EPT materials in the market that have devoted a great share to language learning instead of teaching the language learning strategies.

Kirkpatrick and Gyem (2012) probed the possible existence of negative and positive washback effect in an examination. According to the study, participants did not have specific training about the exam that they were supposed to take part in. Kirkpatrick participants stated

lack of curriculum material as an important issue for their exam preparation, but in contrast, the EPT study proved the availability of language related materials and EPT materials. This was also depicted in their questionnaire responses in which they talked about having a number of English language learning materials or EPT related materials available at their library.

The results of this study were in agreement with what Vernon and Hoffman (1956) proved. The researcher stated that educators prefer to neglect subjects in activities that are not directly associated with passing examinations. So, perhaps, the reason that 50 percent of the Iranian PhD candidates participating in the study had English related materials, or 67 percent of them had translation experience but there still exists language problems among them, is perhaps due to the conclusion that Vernon reached, because in this case they have perhaps preferred to learn the skills or subskills that are available in EPT.

Salehi and Yunes (2012) concluded that Iranian PhD university entrance exam exerts a negative effect on English language teachers both because of exam format, and exam content. The results of this study are in agreement with what Yunes and Salehi concluded, because EPT as a proficiency test is only testing grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension of the candidates, so, it has exerted a negative washback effect on the materials that the candidates are using, or the EPT format that they are participating or preparing.

### **Conclusion**

As a general conclusion to the study, it can be stated that washback of EPT (English Proficiency Test) for Iranian PhD candidates on their learning materials occurred in two distinct ways. A negative washback effect was there in terms of curriculum because EPT had the power to narrow down the curriculum and measure Iranian PhD candidates' proficiency based on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. Nevertheless, no productive skill was measured. In other words, the insights from the findings show that EPT exerted negative influence on educational policies inasmuch as the mastery of communicative competence was neglected. Therefore, teachers are forced to concentrate on whatever they believe would be tested in EPT.

Positive washback effect was there in terms of the content of EPT since all the EPT materials have made the use of effective syllabi. In terms of materials, Iranian PhD candidates stated that the textbooks are not at a suitable level, and the topics of the reading comprehension sections were uninteresting and unfamiliar. Moreover, it was also stated that the commercial course books are not aligned with the content; hence, it seems that there is a negative washback effect of EPT on the learning materials of Iranian PhD candidates.

From the foregoing arguments, it can be concluded that washback is a complicated phenomenon, mediated by a host of factors, among which textbook resources used for test preparation is notable. To be more effective, test construction should follow two major criteria as proposed by Popham (1987): 1. Professional ethics which supports that textbooks should not interfere with major standards of education and should serve as a cornerstone for test success. 2. Educational defensibility which stresses the fact that textbook should not only enhance learners' test performance, but also knowledge of the subject.

The findings have important implications for language teachers in general, and EFL language teachers, syllabus designers, and material developers, in particular. Language teachers should bear in mind that even though the use of authentic texts is necessary; it does not mean that the teacher should abandon the use of materials created for instructional purposes. Rather, a blend of the two seems to be more appropriate. Textbook writers and coursebook developers should

develop more efficient learning materials which are finely tuned toward learners' needs and provide effective, engaging, and straightforward materials to enable them successfully pass the exam.

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