

## Investigation of Teacher as an Inducing Factor of Washback in Pakistan

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### Abstract

Washback is defined as the impact of test on teaching and learning. Teacher and learner are equally inter-relational but the former occupies a more prominent place in academics. Alderson (cited in Cheng & Watanabe, 2004) claims, “In short, it is at least as much the teacher who brings about washback, be it positive or negative, as it is the test” (p. 4). This study aimed to investigate the washback of Higher Secondary Exams (HSC) on the teachers at one of the government colleges in Hyderabad. The data for this small-scale study was collected using semi-structured interviews from 10 intermediate government college teachers from Hyderabad and ten classroom observations, one of each interviewed teacher. The findings of the study showed the mixed impact regarding the teacher largely inducing the negative washback and slightly the positive washback and vice versa too due to some ground realities irrespective of any pressure of test demands / examination, administration and parents. The findings further suggest that the HSC exams do not directly exert any adequate washback on teachers. Their teaching methodology and other related sub-factors have both washback directions – negative as well as positive.

**Key Words:** Washback, Impact, Test demands

### 1. Introduction

A teacher plays an instrumental role in achieving the curricular goals. Every government college has a substantial number of senior and junior teachers of different subjects. Every subject they teach is comprised of certain chapters or units to be completed in a given time that is referred to as “syllabus” set by Board of Curriculum and all teachers know the educational goals of syllabus assumed by curriculum. To attain the expected aim of syllabus, that is the learning of

students, the teachers adopt or innovate certain teaching strategies. These strategies are sometimes comprehensive and straightaway as envisaged by an ideal teaching; but sometimes, these strategies are “short – cuts” to the annual examination in order to secure an optimum score in examination. The reasons for both are multiple. For the former, the ideal learning of students is considered the first priority by the teacher and the examination the second. For the latter, the expected score in examination is the first priority by the teacher and the learning the second priority. The teacher who focuses on score based teaching has one purpose like ‘exam results for admission in higher level’. The future of the learner becomes the cause of grave concern for parental reputation and institutional credibility. These both forces equally exert at the teacher to carve out the score oriented pedagogy, materials and formative tests. But these two teaching mechanisms have certain variations at different public and private colleges. The administration at Government colleges in Sindh is considered the least concerned for the score in annual exam and the concern of the parents is also noted as lukewarm; therefore, the teacher too seems least pressurised for “teaching to the test” for examination.

## **2. Significance of the Study**

Washback is a “highly complex rather than a monolithic phenomenon” (Cheng, et al., p. 19). According to Pearson, “It is generally acceptable that public examinations influence the attitudes, behaviour, and motivations of teachers, learners, and parents” (1988: 98). The test exercises a moral, social and psychological pressure upon the learner for which the teacher is indispensable. The teacher’s role magnifies in the class and is expected by his learners to work up to their learning goals or any other individualized expectations. This linchpin status of the teacher is, of course, an inducing factor of washback. It is this central factor of learning that is focus of this study. This study is aimed at investigating into teaching phenomenon, i.e. whether the teacher at Government Muslim Science Degree College Hyderabad feels administrative and parental pressure or moral pressure to complete the syllabus; and further, whether the teacher tailors out teaching practices as required by the annual question papers or not.

### **2.1. Aims and Objectives**

This study aims to investigate the role of teacher in all teaching perspectives like teaching methodology, the ideal completion of syllabus by him and the multidimensional limitations he

works within. Whereas the objectives are to know whether the teachers at the college aforementioned carry the similar limitations or personalize their teachings and related practices.

## **2.2. Research Questions**

This study attempts to answer the following research questions regarding the teacher as an inducing factor of washback.

**Q. No. 01. How much successfully do the teachers complete the syllabus?**

**Q. No. 02. How much do the question papers impact the teaching methodology and materials?**

**Q. No. 03. What administrative and parental pressures do the teachers feel that affect the teaching methodology?**

## **3. Literature Review**

Prior to Alderson and Wall (1993), there had been a number of researchers focusing on multi-dimensional effects of tests or examinations but the credit of foundation for systematic and consistent washback research goes to only the aforementioned two researchers. They presented a paper titled as “Does Washback Exist?” which has a remarkable significance in the field of testing in education. It was aimed at investigating the existence of this complex phenomenon. They criticized the earlier research done by Vernon (1956), Davis (1968), Kellaghan, Madaus, and Airasian (1982), Morrow (1986), Pearson (1988), Hughes (1989), Khaniya (1990a and 1990b, p.115) because their research was not based on “actual classroom practices” but rather on “questionnaires and interviews” (Green, 2013, p.42).

Latham (cited in Cheng, 2008) is considered the primary source to have talked about the significance of examination – an encroaching power – (p.349). Cheng cited Latham in the article: How it influences the prevalent view of life and work among young men, and how it affects parents, teacher, writers of educational books, and the notion of public about education (p.349).

Researchers have defined this term in a number of different ways. According to Pearson, “It is generally acceptable that public examinations influence the attitudes, behaviour, and motivations of teachers, learners, and parents” (1988, p.98). Buck (1988, p.17 cited in Bailey)

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states, “There is a natural tendency for both teachers and students to tailor their classroom activities to the demands of the test, especially when the test is very important for the future of students, and pass rates are used as measure of teacher success”. This influence of test on the classroom (referred to as washback by language testers) is very important; this effect can be either beneficial or harmful. For Hughes (1989, p.1) “the effect of testing on teaching and learning is known as backwash”.

Washback studies have grown since 1990. “Does Washback Exist?” - an empirical study in Sri Lanka conducted by Alderson and Wall in 1993 - was a valuable study with their 15 hypotheses. Hughes presented his washback trichotomy – *participants, process and products* - in 1993; and in 1996 Bailey came up with a model of Hughes’ trichotomy and incorporated “wash-forward” to the model. Green (ibid.) suggested a comprehensive washback study in 2013 with his “washback variability and intensity”. These were the laudable efforts related to concept, mechanism, effects of washback and test impact.

The most intricate and ever debated aspect of washback is its direction. The washback mechanism involves a sufficient number of variables, personal and contextual, between two extremities – from teaching to testing. Much research has been conducted on finding the consistent factors of negative and positive washback but the ultimate finales are yet to come. If the optimum results become the only objective of the test, the teaching and learning approach of a teacher and a learner gets wishfully twisted. For example, a specific / required score / bands on IELTS and TOEFL is the foremost priority with the learner so with the teacher as well. To achieve it, the teacher and the learner adopt short-cuts to test. This forced approach is bound to ignore some of the areas of syllabus, learning activities and curriculum at large. Vernon (1956:166) suggested that these practices “distort the curriculum”. He has also lamented about excessive coaching for examination.

Davis (1968a, p.125) has also disapproved these practices. He considers examinations as “teaching devices”. To him, the teaching and the learning become confined to past papers, which consequently narrow down the curriculum. Alderson and Wall (1993 cited in Jaan & Khan, 2013) indicate that if teachers use tests to make their students pay more attention to learning, it is

positive influence of testing. If the teachers narrow their curriculum to make their students more sharp on the exams, it will be a negative influence of testing on the students learning (p. 65).

Nobel and Smith (cited in Cheng, 2000, p.11) have pointed out that the rising popularity of high-stakes tests has directly and negatively affected the teaching profession. He states that “teaching test-taking skills and drilling on multiple-choice worksheets is likely to boost the scores but unlikely to promote general understanding” (1991b, p.6). Smith (1991b, p.8) had findings from qualitative study of the role of external testing in elementary schools that “testing programs substantially reduce the time available for instruction, narrow curriculum offerings and mode of instruction, and potentially reduce the capacities of teachers to teach content and to use methods and materials that are incompatible with standardized testing formats”.

In a study by Alderson and Wall (1993) in British Columbia has enticing findings from “the impact of re-introducing final examinations at Grade 12”. The teachers were found to have involved into non-academic practices like narrowing down the syllabus to the requirements of the examination. The students assumed the taught lessons being the more pertinent and important so they had memorization approach with little emphasis on critical thinking or learning required by curriculum. Ahmad and Rao (2012) in their study on students’ communicative competence in Pakistan had the findings that current examination exerts negative influence on the students’ learning as they learn only to pass examination.

Adnan and Mehmood (2014) investigated the washback effects in Pakistan on the intermediate (XI & XII) level. After completing the 12 year education in English medium with English as compulsory subject, the male and female students miserably fail to acquire the expected proficiency in English language. This study was focused on teaching methodology and materials used in the class. It seems that this study is based on Alderson and Wall’s first single hypothesis – “Test will influence teaching.” This quantitative study has 50 college teachers public and private as its sample size; and perhaps, this study was the first of its type in Pakistan on the grounds of number of participants. The researchers found that HSSC (Higher Secondary School Certificate – XI & XII) exam patterns supersede the learning needs of students. Washback factors like material, content, syllabus, and teaching get hijacked to students’ success in exam hall. Thus, washback gets negatively affected.

Asma, Sabeen and Isabell (2014) investigated the washback effects of intermediate English examination in Pakistan. This empirical study was qualitative focused on “teaching and learning”– first and second hypotheses conceived by Alderson and Wall – at public sector colleges. The total participants were from Kinnaird College for Women, Lahore. The findings showed that the teachers had to focus more on score oriented activities as every student prioritized it for selection in aspired discipline in graduation. This practice had a cumulative negative effect on some of the areas of English syllabus and curriculum as well. The learners / students felt encouraged to study the selected areas of English syllabus keeping in view the requirements of examination rather than develop English language proficiency/abilities/skills as envisaged by curriculum that is tantamount to negative washback on teaching and learning at the college” (ibid. p.152).

#### **4. Methodology**

This is a qualitative study in which the data was collected using two main tools – semi-structured interviews and classroom observations by the researcher who has also been the teacher at the same college for last above 15 years. These both tools are significant in gathering authentic information for analysis. The validity of these tools can be ascertained from the fact of the participant being a direct source for data. Therefore, interviews and observations make the research truer and better for obtaining the in-depth data. As stated by Creswell and Clark (2007, p.9), “In multilingual and multicultural settings relying on quantitative data is probably quite weak in terms of results. To bring strong results, the qualitative instruments are more reliable to qualitative researchers”. Wanatabe (2004) strongly advocates the importance of incorporating the ethnographic or qualitative approach to washback in 1997 and followed it in Japanese context in terms of University Entrance Test system. Alderson and Walls (1993) had qualitative research in Sri Lanka, Cheng (ibid.) had the same framework in Thailand. The obvious reason could be exploring more and more till the bottom level of required information is reached. “The interviewer gains rapport or establishes friendly and secure relationship with the interviewee, a certain type of confidential information (Smith et al., 1991, p.218 cited in Pathan, 2012, p.86). Interviews provide an inlet to thinking recesses of an interviewee or participant. Associationism (Aristotle – 350 B.C) is comprised of four laws of Similarity, Contrast, Contiguity and Frequency, which are also called Laws of Association of Ideas (Olson and Hergenhahn, cited in

Weibell, 2011, p.24). While replying to a question, these laws get interplayed. And in the second data collection tool – observations - the researcher observes the actor’s talk and actions vividly that can generate the researcher’s vigorous thoughts for comparative and corroborative analysis.

#### **4.1. Data Collection Tools & Participants**

In this study 12 teachers of different subjects were approached but only 10 participants were included because two participants lacked serious interest in queries and showed to be theatrical and censorious. The college has above 45 senior and junior teaching staff. The majority of the participants were regular, punctual and seniors, i.e. above ten year teaching experience because they could share the authentic information for having adopted or innovated teaching methodology. A serious teaching attitude was also the salient feature of these participants. Every effort was made that every participant should represent his subject in order to see where washback works and in which direction.

Observations made by the researcher have much association to the teacher participants, teaching methodology generally applied at the college, the requirements of the students, and the annual papers by BISE, Hyderabad.

From every participant, a semi-structured interview not exceeding eight minutes was conducted and recorded and saved to Voice Recorder on Samsung Grand Prime mobile. This college has multilingual staff. They speak mostly Urdu and Sindhi and some nativized English; therefore, the interview was conducted in the mother tongue of the interviewee and then translated into English. Afterwards, the interviews were transcribed to MS Office Word 2007 on laptop. The prints were taken and the required themes were highlighted. All codal formalities like initial codes - “First Cycle Coding” (Saldana, 2009, p.3) were also completed as the fundamental requirement of thematic analysis and those formalities facilitated thematic analysis that is “... a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon (Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997, cited in Fereday & Muir-Cochrane). According to Rice & Ezzy, “The process involves the identification of themes through “careful reading and re-reading of the data” (1999, cited in Pathan, *ibid.*). Every teacher was codified from T1 to T10.

## 5. Findings and Interpretation

The primary assignment of the teacher is to successfully complete the syllabus through adopted or innovated teaching methodology. How have the research participants responded to the research question no. 01 can be gauged from the following quotes. The research question one is **“How much successfully do the teachers complete the syllabus at the college?”**

**T1 said,** “I try my best to complete but Mathematics has a lengthy syllabus with exercises too. A chapter or two get skipped for being unimportant for exam.” Responding to a seminal question, he said, “Some other factors also affect the timely and successful completion of syllabus like mixed abilities, weak base, university exams.”

**T2 said,** “I manage to complete. It is all a random way of doing that and it is not an ideal way because there are various reasons.”

**T4 said,** “Yes. The syllabus gets affected. I mean if they [students] understand or not, I proceed to completing it.” To another side question, he replied, “Some topics might be left.”

**T7 said,** “Yes, if the session runs properly.” To another question he replied, “I equally concentrate first to last. Every topic in syllabus is important for exam, daily life and knowledge for higher studies like BS and onward. I don’t tailor out my teaching to the examination. The class has multiple affecting factors But I manage all.”

The above excerpts from the teacher interviews demonstrate that the majority of the participants were unable to successfully complete the syllabus. The reasons narrated by them were internal as well as external like the lengthy exercises, weak educational background of students, mixed abilities in the class, external examinations in the college building and a few other outer issues. Therefore, the teachers got constrained and compelled to concentrate upon the important sections of the syllabus. My observations, as a teacher at the same college, have got integrated to the participants’ views. I like to make certain addition that the chunk of seniors (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> graders) is also a determinant for twisting syllabus damaging the students’ learning. Only a few senior teachers work to materialize curricular aims. The above analysis and discussion enable to conclude that the majority of the teachers were found involved in cutting the syllabus because of certain interior and exterior constraints. A small number of teachers face the



similar constraints but they devise feasible pedagogic strategies to cause the optimum learning of the students. Therefore, the washback direction is the teacher-based phenomenon. In other words, the teacher himself is responsible for bringing direction to washback be it positive or negative. In words of Alderson (2004), “In short, it is at least as much the teacher who brings about wash back, be it positive or negative, as it is the test” (cited in Cheng & Curtis, *ibid.*).

The exam results are very precious to the future of students. It is largely believed in the research on washback that the examination precipitates the learning and the latter precipitates the teaching. In this context, responding to the questions regarding the impact of the question paper on the teaching methodology and materials, the participants expressed as follows:

**T4 said,** “During teaching, I do intimate the students about important topics or chapters for examination but it does not mean that I make selective teaching.”

**T6 said,** “I have experience of teaching at private college before I joined public college. Paper focused teaching was the priority at that college but in government colleges the teaching is different. No body, except a few students ask me to teach according to annual examination.”

**T7 said,** “I am a senior teacher and I know the more important areas of my subject and expected questions in the paper. While teaching I point out to students examinational value of the topic, but I do not confine my teachings to those areas alone. I make my teachings and formative tests comprehensive. Let the learning of the student be complete.”

**T10 said,** “I follow a common teaching methodology and complete syllabus very successfully. Many students know the national language and culture of Pakistan so it is not like Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics. The students do not feel the need to be taught in light of question papers.”

The quotations above show that the question paper did not have any traditional impact on teaching methodology. The teachers adopted a utilitarian teaching methodology to complete the syllabus. Some teachers were found to point out the topics or chapters for annual examination during their teachings but none was found involved into selective teaching in light of past papers and they were more assiduous for the learning of the students. The findings shown in this study are quite different from Usma and Asim’s (2014) qualitative findings and are also entirely

opposed to findings by Asma et al. (2014). This further shows that the examinations are not teaching devices at the Government colleges in Sindh province as otherwise believed by Davis (ibid.). This ‘apparently’ positive washback is actually negative; therefore, it may be earmarked as ‘Negatively Positive Washback’. My observations corroborate the findings discussed above. Of course, washback varies from situation to situation.

Administration and parents are immediate stakeholders in educational institutes. Their intervention for different motives is significant and affects the pedagogy. Responding to the queries about administrative and parental pressures affecting the teaching, the respondents’ views were as under.

**T6 said,** “During last six years here of my teaching, it has been neither administration nor parents to ask me about teaching methodology or completing the syllabus or whatever.”

**T7 said,** “This college is well reputed in Sindh province but I haven’t felt any such pressure throughout my teaching here for last above ten years. To me teaching is the prior concern of the teacher. Administrative and parental role comes afterwards.”

**T9 said,** “No pressure of any kind. This is not a private college where the parents pressurize the administration and it pressurizes the teachers to work to the parents’ satisfaction. Once a year, the fathers of few students come to enquire about their progress.”

**Observer said,** “It has really seemed neither the college administration nor parents’ role playing their active part for achieving required annual results as happens at private colleges. Both appear to be least concerned to this.”

It is clearly shown in extracts that the private education has a different mechanism than the public education. A government college teacher enjoys much teaching liberty. The principal of the college hardly enquires the teaching staff about the academic progress because the parents’ role is almost divested from the academics and administration of the college. This attitude has let the college functionaries dwindle in function. These findings are explicitly opposite to the findings in prior research on ‘how administration and parents exert pressure on teacher’; but implicitly, these findings also smell harmonizing with what causes negative washback elucidated in same literature review.

## 6. Discussion

Focusing on the first research question of this study, the findings generate a thought that the teachers do not deliberately switch over to the practice of bypassing syllabus. It is not due to question paper but there are some other factors that behoove the teachers to curtail the syllabus. One teacher (T7) seems entirely outstanding from the rest. To him, teaching seems for the extensive learning, not a piece meal affair. Despite the internal and external matters faced by the majority teachers including T7, he manages to complete the syllabus timely and successfully. He appears to be supporting his teaching with the past question papers; the teaching task of such teacher enhances, no doubt, but benefits the learner. And only such dedicated teacher is honoured as an inducing factor for positive washback unlike his colleagues who were found to be inducing the negative washback. This comparative analysis integrates Alderson and Wall's (1990) qualitative findings in British Columbia pertaining to the role of the teacher in washback. According to them, owing to certain reasons the teachers were found responsible for non-academic practices like narrowing down syllabus to subsequently cause an unhealthy effect upon curriculum or educational goals of education. Vernon (ibid.) has strongly disapproved 'syllabus curtailment' and dubbed it as distorting the curriculum. The negative washback is broadly indicated and the positive washback is partially indicated by the findings on the question number one.

About the second research question, something distinctive that T6 has shared is that the question papers impact the pedagogy in private colleges, not in public colleges. His views are valuable and plausible in the context that affording parents often send their children to private institutes for various reasons; and one cogent reason is exam-oriented pedagogy at such institutes to bring higher results. Therefore, this enables to deduce the conclusion that the past question papers never impact the pedagogy at Government colleges in Sindh province. And in this aspect of teaching, the teacher is not an inducing factor of negative washback. The findings further latently indicate that there is a reason for not "teaching to the test" and that is the academics at the government colleges in Sindh looks an ignored phenomenon by the immediate and higher administration. The guardians put their wards in the college and never pursue further for whole year. The concerned department has no concern for the educational progress or annual results of the students. That's why the examination does not impact the teaching methodology; and only in

such context, the teacher shows to be an inducing factor seemingly for positive washback but actually negative in results.

Concerning the third research question, it is the majority of lower middle class and lower class parents enroll their children to the public colleges. Mostly being poorly educated and trained, the parents never bother to know the academic progress of their children. Therefore, the teacher never feels pressurized. Often, the teachers at Cadet Colleges and private colleges have left to join public colleges because of freedom of action. The above views demonstrate that washback really varies from situation to situation. According to the requirement, it may sound a positive washback but ‘no pressure’ environment; even administrative, is liable to distracting the teacher causing the negative washback. And my observation supports this implicit dimension of negative washback.

## 7. Conclusion

This qualitative study on teacher as an inducing factor of positive washback included 10 teacher participants. The participants represented their subjects mostly science subjects and shared their valuable views. Their views were recorded, transcribed, coded and thematically analyzed in the light of three research questions. The findings were similar as well as opposite to certain washback research discussed in literature review. The questions number two and three decidedly gathered conclusion that the teacher is an inducing factor of seemingly positive washback that is negative in intension. The question number one gathered conclusion that the chunk of teachers are inducing factor of negative washback whereas the slice of the teachers are inducing factors of positive washback. These findings seem to largely establish the true pedagogic picture of the teachers at the government colleges in Sindh. But the fact remains intact that washback direction varies from situation to situation and that’s why Alderson and Wall (1993) call it a “complex phenomenon”.

### Key Term:

**Negatively Positive Washback:** A washback that is apparently positive but actually damaging the educational goals.

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