

WASHBACK OF THE ENGLISH SECTION OF COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAM ON THE STUDENTS' PRODUCTIVE AND RECEPTIVE SKILLS

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Abstract

Exam plays a powerful role in educational system and exerts significant washback on students' learning. Washback, the impact of exams on education in general and language examining in particular, has become a popular area of study within educational research. This paper focuses on the washback effects of college entrance exam on students' productive and receptive skills in STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung. The main concern of the study was to investigate the impact of college entrance exam on productive and receptive language skills in STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung. 53 first year students at English Education Department in the academic year of 2015-2016 of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung attended the study. A 26-item questionnaire was designed and administered to 53 students. The data were analyzed using statistical analysis including descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation). It has been found out that the exam has some negative effects on students' language productive and receptive skills on the first year students at English Education Department of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung. Some changes to exam that might be grateful are discussed in the last section of the paper.

Keywords: washback effect, college entrance exam, students' productive skills

1. INTRODUCTION

Definitely, testing is never a neutral process and always has consequences. Negative or positive, strong or weak, the influence of tests on learning has been termed as 'washback' or 'backwash' (Biggs: 1995). Washback or backwash, a term now commonly used in applied linguistics, refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning (Alderson & Wall: 1993), and has become an increasingly prevalent and

prominent phenomenon in education "what is assessed becomes what is valued, which becomes what is taught" (McEwen: 1995, p. 42). College entrance exam was designed to select candidate students for STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung and to know their basic knowledge in verbal and non verbal skill, English, and math. Since English is a compulsory core subject in high school teaching, the college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu

Lampung remains some components of the college entrance exam. The English component of this exam included the aspect of vocabulary mastery such as finding synonym of the word based on context.

The main concern of the study was to investigate the impact of college entrance exam on students' productive and receptive language skills in STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung in the academic year of 2015/2016. The study addressed the following research questions in particular:

1. What is the washback effect of the English components of college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on productive skills (writing and speaking) of the first year students of English Education Department?
2. What is the washback effect of the English components of college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on receptive skills (reading and listening) of the first year students of English Education Department?
3. What do the students think about the changes to the exam that might be useful?

2. RESEARCH METHOD

The participants of this study were 53 (48 females and 5 males) first year students of English education department of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung.

The data of this study came from two sources: a structured questionnaire and a set of semi-structured interviews. In most of the washback studies, the methods used are based on surveys, interviews, testing measures, classroom observations or a combination of these (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, Ferman, 1996; Watanabe, 1996). The survey comprised of 5-point Likert-scale items (1=strongly disagree; 2=disagree; 3=no idea; 4=agree; 5=strongly agree). The survey which skills participants focus on how they study while getting prepared for college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung and, their attitudes towards the influence of college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung of on their language productive skills (writing and speaking). All questionnaires were delivered in Indonesian language in order to prevent any misunderstandings of the survey items. Chi-square test was used to

determine the reliability of the survey questions. It is a “nonparametric statistical test of hypotheses for variables” The chisquare values were $\text{sig} < 0.05$ indicating adequate reliability for each of the dimension of the survey. The face validity of the survey instrument was ascertained by presenting the questionnaire to four experts studying in the Foreign Language Education department. The experts made some observations and modifications on the survey items.

Descriptive statistics including frequency, percentage, means and standard deviations were used to find an answer for the research objective: the first objective, “What is the washback effect of the English components of college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on productive skills (writing and speaking) of the first year students of English Education Department?”, the second objective, “What is the washback effect of the English components of college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on receptive skills (reading and listening) of the first year students of English Education Department?”, and the third objective

“What do the students think about the changes to the exam that might be useful?” All statistical analysis was performed using SPSS software (SPSS Version 19).

3.FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Washback effect of college the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on productive skills (writing and speaking) of the first year students of English education department

The first question on this study asked about “What is the washback effect of college the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on productive skills (writing and speaking) of the first year students of English education department?”

Washback on writing

In the survey item related to writing skills, participants were asked if they had studied to improve their writing ability although it was not tested in the college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung. 87.2% of the participants stated that they did not study to develop their writing skills since it was not tested in the college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu

Lampung. 87.2% of the participants' not studying to develop their writing skills as it was not tested implies that the college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung have a strong negative effect on learners' writing skills. The next survey item about writing skill questions whether the participants would study to improve their writing skills if it was tested in the college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung. The strong negative impact of the college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on writing skills confirms the findings of the previous survey item. 85.4% of the participants stated that they would study to develop their writing skills if the college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung had a part which test this skill.

Washback on speaking

The participants were asked whether they had tried to improve their listening skill or not although it was not tested in the college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung. 82.4% of the participants did not do anything to develop their speaking skills just because the college entrance exam of

STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung did not check how well they spoke. 82.4% of the participants' not studying to develop their speaking skills as it was not tested implies that the college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung have a strong negative effect on learners' speaking skills. So as to clarify the negative washback effect of the tests on their speaking skills participants were also asked whether they would study to improve their speaking ability if it was tested. 81.5% of the participants stated that they would study to develop speaking skills if the college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung had a part testing it, which can be interpreted as the negative washback effect of these tests on oral skills.

Washback effect of the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on receptive skills of the first year students of English education department

The second question of this study asked "What is the washback effect of the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on

receptive skills of the first year students of English education department?”

Washback on reading

To evaluate the impact of the college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on reading participants were asked if they had studied to improve their reading skill while getting prepared for the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung, 55.7% of the participants stated that they had studied to improve their reading skills although it was not tested in the college entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung. On the other hand, only 44.3% of the participants disagreed that they had studied to improve their reading skills. The high rate (55.7%) of agree implies that the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung have positive washback effect on reading.

Washback on listening

Participants were asked whether they had studied to improve their listening skills although it was not tested in the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung. 91.6% of the participants did not study for listening

skills on account of the fact that it was not tested in the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung. As for proving the negative washback effect of the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on listening skills, the students were also asked whether they would study to develop their listening skill if it was tested. 83.5% of the participants stated that they would study to develop their listening skills if the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung had a part that tested listening. Only 16.5% of the participants stated that even if the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung tested listening skills, they would still not study to develop this skill.

Changes to the exam that might be useful

The last question of this study asked about “What do the students think about the changes to the exam that might be useful?” The students who were interviewed for this study suggested some changes for the exam. Firstly, they said vocabulary sections of the exam should be reviewed. Vocabulary questions should be contextual, and they should be

integrated in the test items of other skills where possible. Secondly, although it is not ideal to test writing and speaking skills indirect multiple choice test items, there should be more items in the test which indirectly measure students' writing and speaking abilities. Thirdly, the reading and listening test that reflect the real-life texts, having variety in length and genres is needed to be included in the test. The last, in all the sections of the test, there should be fewer explicit-answer questions and more implied-meaning questions as these implied-meaning questions require the use of critical thinking.

Discussion

The aim of this study is to investigate the washback effect of the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on productive and receptive skills of the first year students of English education department. The results of the survey analysis reveal that the most positively affected skill by these language tests is reading skill. This is an indication of the negative washback effect of the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on particularly on the productive skills of speaking and

writing and the receptive skill of listening. The findings of the study are in line with Sevimli (2007) who has studied washback effects of foreign language component of the university entrance examination. There is also similarity with the findings of Karabulut (2007) who found that students and teachers focus more on the grammar, reading and vocabulary which are tested in YGS and ignore the ones that are not tested (listening, speaking, writing). Rahimi and Nazhand's (2010) findings about the washback effect of IELTS preparation courses are also parallel to the results of the current study. They asserted that IELTS exam has a negative washback effect on the development of speaking skill since the format of the IELTS restricts the speaking skill. If people learn a language with the aim of passing an exam at the end of the learning process, they usually tend to study the subjects or improve the skills that they will be tested. For example; if an English test does not involve listening skills, most of the attendees will not have a tendency to improve that specific skill. This outcome is in line with Wall and Alderson (1993) who assert that a test will influence what students study. Most

of the students who take the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung on as an academic requirement of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung will mostly focus on passing the exam. As a result, they will not spend any effort to improve the skills such as listening, speaking and writing that are not included in these tests. This result matches with that of Ferman (2004) who explains how washback is observed through an increased focus on skills included on the test, resulting in “an increase in time allotted for the development of these skills” . Shohamy (1992) and Shohamy et al. (1996) who emphasize that a measurement-driven system leads to cramming for the test and concentrates attention on the skills that are tested. Finally, the results of the current study reveal significant differences between the development of productive and receptive skills of the participants. They do not focus on the skills which are not tested in the exams. These findings are in line with the findings of Smith (1991) that the test itself determines what people will study and test like activities are all consequences of external testing.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung have positive washback effect only on reading skills of the Turkish academics while these tests have negative on writing, listening and speaking skills. In other words, productive skills of speaking and writing and receptive skill of listening are totally neglected by the participants of these tests since these skills are not tested. When the structure and content of these exams are taken into consideration, the reason why the participants do not do any kinds of listening, writing, speaking activities for getting prepared these exams could be easily understood. Participants are highly interested in developing their reading skills since these exams require individuals to have highly developed reading skills and knowledge of grammar to get a high score. However, language tests are expected to integrate all the four skills for assessing test takers' language performance. A language test should definitely be multi-faceted. As the entrance exam of STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung only vocabulary mastery rather than writing, speaking and listening skills, we can say that they are

not multifaceted tests. Consequently, the test designers in STKIP Muhammadiyah Pringsewu Lampung should design and use alternative language assessment tests which include all the dimensions of language performance considering the fact that academicians have to compete with their counterparts in the international arena.

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