



## ASSESSING THE INFLUENCE OF HIGH-STAKES ENGLISH EXAMINATIONS ON TEACHING PRACTICES IN DISTRICT SWABI

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### ABSTRACT:

*This study investigates the washback effect of the Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSSC) English Language Examination on teaching practices and student learning outcomes in District Swabi, Pakistan. High-stakes examinations play a central role in shaping educational practices, particularly in developing contexts where academic success is closely tied to examination performance. Using a quantitative research design, data were collected from 20 English language teachers through a structured questionnaire based on a five-point Likert scale. The findings reveal that the HSSC English examination significantly influences teaching methods, lesson planning, and classroom activities. A majority of teachers reported aligning their instruction with exam patterns, emphasizing grammar, past papers, and rote memorization. While some positive washback was observed, particularly in improving reading and writing skills, the overall impact was largely negative. Communicative competencies such as speaking and listening were found to be neglected due to their absence in the examination format. Additionally, teachers expressed concerns regarding the validity of the exam in assessing real language proficiency and highlighted increased student anxiety and exam-oriented learning behaviours. The study concludes that although the examination system provides structure, it restricts holistic language development. It recommends revising the examination framework to incorporate communicative skills and promote balanced language learning.*

### INTRODUCTION

Examinations play a very important role in shaping teaching and learning practices in almost every educational system. In many countries, especially developing countries such as Pakistan, examinations are considered the main measure of students' academic success. Students' promotion to higher classes, admission to universities, and future career opportunities often depend on their exam results. Because of this high importance, teachers, students, and institutions give special attention to examination performance.

At higher secondary level in Pakistan, the Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSSC) English Language Examination is one of the most significant public examinations. English is not only a compulsory subject but also a medium of instruction in higher education. Therefore, success in English is essential for students' academic and professional growth. However, when too much emphasis is placed on examination results, teaching and learning may become exam-oriented rather than learning-oriented.

This situation often leads to a phenomenon known as washback. Washback refers to the influence that examinations have on teaching methods, classroom practices, and student learning behaviour. When the exam focuses on limited skills such as grammar rules, memorized answers, and writing templates, teachers may design their lessons according to these requirements instead of focusing on real-life communication skills.

In many Pakistani classrooms, English teaching tends to emphasize rote memorization, past papers, and model answers. Students are trained to pass the exam rather than to use English

effectively in speaking, listening, reading, and writing. As a result, communicative competence and practical language use may be ignored.

Keeping this situation in view, the present study aims to investigate how the HSSC English examination influences English language teaching practices in District Swabi. The study seeks to understand whether the examination produces positive or negative washback and how it affects both teachers and students. By exploring these issues, the study hopes to provide useful insights for improving teaching practices and assessment policies at the higher secondary level.

### **Research Questions**

- To what extent does the HSSC-English Language Examination influence teaching methods and classroom practices in Swabi District?
- What are teachers' perceptions of the washback effect of the HSSC-English Language Examination on students' language learning outcomes?

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

Global educational systems are based on tests and evaluations. Public examination is a powerful tool in teaching and learning in most countries including Pakistan. Teachers tend to align classroom tasks with the expectations of examiners and students, teaching those items that are likely to appear on exams. This is referred to as the washback effect in which examinations affect the English language teachers and students.

Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSSC) is a high-stake exam in Pakistan, which determines the admission to professional colleges. Considering its importance, the HSSC English test has a great influence on the teaching methodologies and student study plans.

This current paper examines the washback effect of language tests including the use of tests in the classroom set up and teacher perceptions. It combines both the international views and particular researches in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context in Pakistan and offers a theoretical approach to the interpretation of the HSSC English Language Examination in Swabi District, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

### **1.1 What is the Concept of Washback in Language Testing?**

Washback has been widely researched which refers to the impact of testing on teaching and learning (Alderson and Wall, 1993). This influence is widespread in all the linguistic settings, such as Pashto, Urdu and English in the Pakistani educational context.

Bailey (1996) defines washback as the classroom level effects of examinations. Many scholars and practitioners argue that tests are powerful tools which influence the design of curricula and learning styles (Brown and Abeywickrama, 2010). The underline reason for washback is that the exams are usually high stakes, the future of students depends on the outcome of exams and teacher performance is frequently evaluated by student performance. As a result, teachers and students strive hard to meet the requirements of the examinations.

### **2.2 Typology of Positive and Negative Washback.**

Most researchers divide washback into two types according to pedagogical effects.

#### **2.2.1 Positive Washback**

Positive washback is one in which examination enhances teaching and learning. For example, when a test assesses all the four skills - speaking, listening, reading, and writing, teachers are motivated to design tasks that continue to develop these skills. According to Taylor (2005), positive washback align teaching with the objectives where students learn to use practical language skills, instead of mastering test-taking techniques.

#### **2.2.2 Negative Washback**

Negative washback refers to the situation where exams may hinder effective learning to take place. This normally occurs when the teachers focus on exam preparation instead of teaching

language skills. When the exam is based on grammar and translation, teachers may ignore teaching communicative skills. High-stakes testing has the potential to narrow the curriculum and limit the creative instruction, resulting in excessive dependence on memorisation and teaching to the test (Cheng, 2005).

### **2.3 Theoretical Views of Washback.**

There are a number of frames that describe the dynamics of how washback works in an educational context. Alderson and Wall (1993) hypothesized that the effects of tests on what is taught, how it is taught, the instruction and the way learners learn. According to their theory, tests arouse behaviours that do not take place in the absence of the tests.

Hughes Model (1989): Hughes separated Participants (students, teachers) and Processes (methodology) and Products (learning outcomes). This model shows the flow of the presence of a test through the participants to influence the end-product of education.

Consequential Validity Consequential Validity (1989): Messick came up with the concept that the validity of a test should encompass its social implications-its impact on teaching and learning-as well as its statistical reliability.

### **2.4 Washback in EFL Contexts**

National exams play a significant role in determining the teaching and learning of English in EFL contexts around the globe. Research has shown that when high-stakes tests are provided, students tend to use past papers and model answers. Cheng (2005) discovered that in most EFL classrooms, classroom activity was largely led by public examinations and a great deal of emphasis was put on grammar exercises and essay writing, often at the cost of verbal communication.

### **2.5 Classroom Instructional Practices**

The need to guarantee student achievement usually compels instructors to teach to the test. It is a strategy that puts more emphasis on format and content of the exam rather than the curriculum at large.

#### **2.5.1 Pedagogical Shifts**

In exam-oriented classrooms teachers tend to devote too much time to practicing past examination questions. They Pay attention to rules of grammar and the structure of formal writing, minimising interactive activities such as role-plays, debates, or presentations. Although this may enhance the test scores, it does not in most cases lead to students who can apply the language in practical situations (Shohamy, 2001).

### **2.6 Student Learning Behaviour**

Washback has a great effect in transforming the manner in which student usually use to learn. Students tend to ignore those skills of language that are not in the exam. For example, speaking students might never practice speaking, instead memorizing vocabulary lists and rules of translation as speaking is not tested on the exam. As a result, students are passed out with high scores and low communicative competence.

### **2.7 Teacher Perceptions**

How English teachers view an exam determine how they teach. Some teachers believe that exams are needed to discipline and motivate. Nevertheless, several teachers in Pakistan believe that high-stakes tests have established a culture of exam-crush that has hampered their creative faculty and compels them to focus result-oriented teaching (Mahmood, 2014).

### **2.8 Washback on English Examinations in Pakistan.**

The Pakistani educational system is examination oriented. Studies show that English tests in Pakistan emphasize on reading and writing, ignoring listening and speaking skills. According to research conducted by the Pakistan Languages and Humanities Review, the majority of



HSSC questions are based more on the lower-order thinking skills, including knowledge and application as compared to analysis or synthesis. This promotes the culture of memorization of learning: students memorize essays and translations in order to secure good grades. Students spend years in English classes without developing communicative competence.

### 2.9 English Examination Context HSSC.

The HSSC is the "gatekeeper" for higher education in Pakistan. Due to this fact, the college teachers the Swabi District usually make use of guidebooks and solved papers. This focus on material that is expected on the exam hampers the learning of those skills and items with least chances to be on the exam.

As far the researcher's knowledge, no localized research has been conducted on the assessment of the influence of high-stakes English examination on teaching practices. There is a significant gap in research regarding the Swabi District. Specifically, how teachers in this region perceive the HSSC's influence on student outcomes remains under-explored.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The research design used in this study is anchored in quantitative approach to explore the washback effect of the HSSC English Language Examination on teaching practices and student outcomes in District Swabi. All English language teachers in the colleges and higher secondary schools in the district formed the population, out of which 20 participants were sampled using convenience sampling strategy. This design was selected to address the limitation both in time and availability and to collect information on the impact of high-stakes testing on classroom dynamics.

The researcher designed a structured questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale to measure responses in the areas of lesson planning, instructional methods, and assessment. The instrument was reviewed by experts to determine the validity and clarity to guarantee academic rigor. The collected data were analysed using SPSS ver. 27.0. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were calculated, followed by relevant interpretations.

### 4. DATA ANALYSIS

#### Research Question 1: Teaching Methods & Classroom Practices

*To examine the extent to which the HSSC-English Language Examination influences teaching methods and classroom practices in Swabi District.*

**Table 1A: Exam Influence on Lesson Planning (Items T1–T2)**

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Agree %	Disagree %
T1. The English examination strongly influences my teaching method.	0	2	2	12	4	80%	10%
T2. I usually plan my lessons according to the exam syllabus and pattern.	2	3	3	5	7	60%	25%

*SD = Strongly Disagree | D = Disagree | N = Neutral | A = Agree | SA = Strongly Agree | n = 20*

**Table 1B: Classroom Focus and Instructional Priorities (Items T3–T6)**

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Agree %	Disagree %
T3. I focus more on helping students pass exams than on developing overall language skills.	6	3	2	4	5	45%	45%
T4. Classroom activities are mainly designed to prepare students for exams.	1	5	3	7	4	55%	30%
T5. The exam limits my ability to use creative or communicative teaching methods.	2	1	6	6	5	55%	15%
T6. I spend most of the time practicing past papers and grammar exercises.	3	4	5	6	2	40%	35%

SD = Strongly Disagree | D = Disagree | N = Neutral | A = Agree | SA = Strongly Agree | n = 20

**Table 1C: Student Preferences and Teacher Motivation (Items T7–T9)**

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Agree %	Disagree %
T7. Students prefer exam-based lessons over interactive language activities.	4	5	4	7	0	35%	45%
T8. The exam encourages rote memorization rather than critical thinking.	4	3	7	4	2	30%	35%
T9. The exam motivates me to improve my teaching strategies.	3	1	6	8	2	50%	20%

SD = Strongly Disagree | D = Disagree | N = Neutral | A = Agree | SA = Strongly Agree | n = 20

**Figure 1: Response Distribution — Research Question 1**

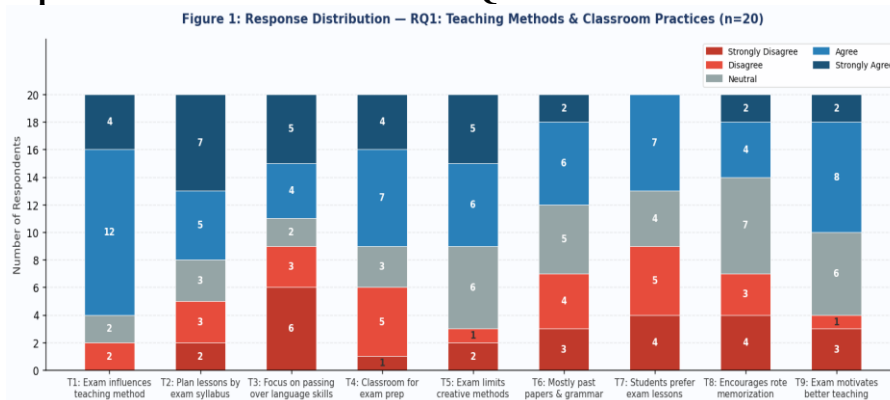


Figure 1. Frequency of responses across RQ1 items (T1–T9), n=20

The data obtained through a survey of 20 English teachers in District Swabi indicates clearly that the HSSC English examination has a strong influence on the practices teachers in perform in the English language classroom. Most of the responses indicated that the English exam either has a direct or indirect influence on teaching practices (T1). This response by a large majority of teachers shows that exam-based teaching is not merely a myth; it is a reality that is being practised by the majority of teachers in the area.

Teachers responded that they plan their lessons based on the exam syllabus and exam paper pattern when it comes to the lesson planning (T2), with a combined 60% agreeing. Although this may sound impressive at first to think that one of the main responsibilities as a teacher is to prepare students to take a career-oriented exam, the question remains intact - are they teaching English language or are they teaching to the exam? The answer appears to skew towards the latter.

It is more interesting when we consider T3 which posed an important question as whether teachers are more concerned with ensuring that the students pass the exams with good grades more than they are concerned with building their overall language skills. In this case, there was a divided opinion, 45% said YES and 45 % said NO. This even split indicates that not all teachers are ignorant of this issue and strive hard to teaching to enhance the learning of language skills then to teach to the test. On the other hand, a considerable number of English teachers continue to believe that examination success must remain the main focus of teaching. This exam pressure is also reflected in classroom activities. In T4, half of teachers reported that activities in their classes are mostly exam-oriented. T5, in the meantime, reveals that 55% of them believe that the exam restricts them from applying creative or communicative activities and instruction. It implies that real communication is being shoved out of the way to practise drills, such as group discussions, presentations, or storytelling, the essential ingredients to developing real communication skills.

Only 30 % in response to the issue of rote learning vs. critical thinking (T8) demonstrated that the exam promotes memorization rather than critical thinking, with 35 % percent disagreeing. However, a considerable number of teachers i.e., 35% probably considers both sides of the picture. Lastly, T9 demonstrates even a more optimistic image, 50 % of teachers indicated that the exam encourages them to teach better, implying that not every exam-related stress can have adverse results.

### Research Question 2: Washback on Students' Language Learning Outcomes

*To explore teachers' perceptions of the washback effect of the HSSC-English Language Examination on students' language learning outcomes.*

**Table 2A: Exam Validity and Skill Development (Items T10–T13)**

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Agree %	Disagree %
T10. The English exam accurately measures students' real language ability.	5	3	7	3	2	25%	40%
T11. Exam pressure affects students' motivation to learn English.	3	2	3	9	3	60%	25%

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Agree %	Disagree %
T12. Students tend to focus only on exam-related topics.	0	10	4	3	3	30%	50%
T13. The exam improves students' reading and writing skills.	5	0	7	6	2	40%	25%

SD = Strongly Disagree | D = Disagree | N = Neutral | A = Agree | SA = Strongly Agree | n = 20

**Table 2B: Student Experience, Anxiety and Motivation (Items T14–T17)**

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Agree %	Disagree %
T14. Listening and speaking skills are often neglected due to exam preparation.	0	3	3	3	11	70%	15%
T15. The exam results reflect students' true language proficiency.	6	3	6	3	2	25%	45%
T16. The exam encourages students to study English more seriously.	4	4	6	4	2	30%	40%
T17. Students experience stress and anxiety due to exam pressure.	1	3	2	5	9	70%	20%

SD = Strongly Disagree | D = Disagree | N = Neutral | A = Agree | SA = Strongly Agree | n = 20

**Table 2C: Teachers' Attitude Toward Exam Reform (Item T18)**

Statement	SD	D	N	A	SA	Agree %	Disagree %
T18. I believe the exam system should be revised to support communicative learning.	2	1	3	7	7	70%	15%

SD = Strongly Disagree | D = Disagree | N = Neutral | A = Agree | SA = Strongly Agree | n = 20

**Figure 2: Response Distribution — Research Question 2**

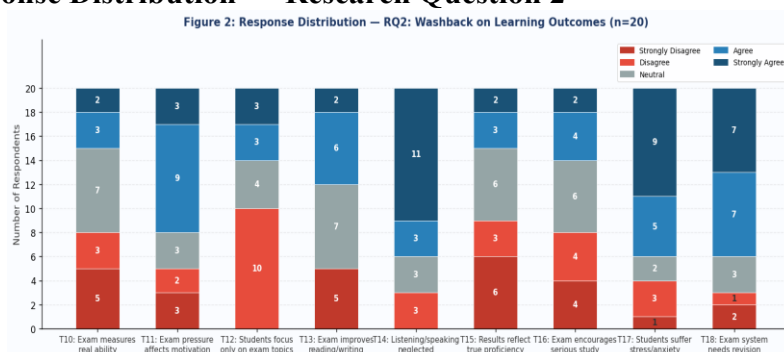


Figure 2. Frequency of responses across RQ2 items (T10–T18), n=20

The second research question involves the perception of teachers on the washback effect i.e. the effects of the exam on what students actually learn and how they experience the English language learning. The results show a less grave state of affairs compared to the first RQ. Firstly, the majority of teachers do not believe that the exam can assess the actual language competence. In T10, 25 % opined that the English exam is a well-structured measure of the language ability of students, however, 40 % disagreed. Similarly, T15 indicates that 45 % of teachers did not agree that the outcomes of examinations are a true measure of language proficiency. These figures imply that a significant number of English language teachers are of the view that the exam is not a fair assessment of students' competence in English language skills.

Another strong trend emerged about the strength of listening and speaking skills. T14 is the most dramatic where 70% of teachers strongly believed that during the language teaching classes, listening and speaking skills were ignored as it was not the demand of the said exam. This is true as the HSSC English exam does not usually consist of any oral or listening elements and, therefore, the teachers do not pay much attention to teaching these skills. Consequently, students are able to write a complete sentence with correct grammar, they can hardly have a simple conversation in English however.

Another significant finding was student stress. T17 indicates that 70 % of teachers (combining agree and strongly agree) think that students are stressed because of exam pressure. This is supported by T11 in which 60% of them opined that exam pressure hampers the motivation of students to learn English. Where anxiety takes over the real inquisitiveness, the learning of language is badly affected.

However, to some positive light, T13 demonstrates that one out of every four teachers feels that the exam also helps the development of reading and writing skills in the students: the areas of language that are test on the high-stake exam. Nevertheless, according to T16, the views on whether the exam motivates students regarding the learning of language, split (40% neutral, 40% disagreed). This shows that the motivation factor of exam is either has less or no affect on the learning of language.

However, the most significant finding is in T18 the call to reform. Teachers (70% combined) indicated that the exam system needs to be revised to enhance communicative learning. It is a strong indicator of what is being communicated by the language instructors on the ground; the existing examination model is not helping students and change is not only necessary, but desired.

## **5. DISCUSSION**

The findings of this research clearly show that Higher Secondary School Certificate (HSSC) English Language Examination has significant washback effect on pedagogical choices as well as learning behaviours among students in Swabi District.

RQ1: Effect on Teaching Practices.

The results indicate that there exists a high correlation between classroom learning and pattern of examination as it is commonly known as teaching to the test. A large proportion of the respondents acknowledged that they base their lesson plans on the exam syllabus. Tests tend to decide what is taught as well as how it is taught as Alderson and Wall (1993) hypothesized. In this regard, teachers are focused on grammar drills, memorization, and past paper analysis rather than communicative tasks.

This constraining impact validates the findings of Cheng (2005) who observed that high-stakes testing tends to restrict teacher autonomy as well as supports traditional teacher-centered

strategies. Moreover, such a clear manifestation of negative washback is the total disregard of any listening and speaking skills. As these skills are not tested in HSSC exam, they are practically not discussed in the classroom. The unassessed skills will automatically be relegated to the lower rankings of the instructional hierarchy, as Hughes (2003) points out.

RQ2: Teacher Perceptions of learning outcomes.

Teachers perceive the washback effect on students as a "double-edged sword." Although some, a small minority, said that the exam gives structure and motivation, which is what the idea of positive washback suggests by Bailey, (1996), the overall mood is negative. The majority of teachers question the consequential validity of the exam, claiming that high performance in the test is not related to real communicative competence.

Valid tests, as Messick (1996) pointed out, should reflect the real-life use of language. At the present time, the pressure to achieve has encouraged great extent of anxiety and stress among students and has redirected attention towards psychological stamina rather than intensive learning. Such high-stakes settings, as Shohamy (2001) points out, generate fear-based learning as opposed to actual communication. This promotes memorization of model answers, something that, as Wall (2005) says, stifles critical thinking and sustained competence.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The research concludes that HSSC English Examination in Swabi has a bias wash back effect. Although it is effective at encouraging students to learn particular aspects of the syllabus, it does not help them to develop the language holistically. The existing system makes the classroom into a rehearsal instead of a language acquisition site and students get high marks but low functional fluency.

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