WASHBACK EFFECT OF VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOL FINAL EXAMINATION: INDONESIAN EFL TEACHERS' AND STUDENTS' VOICES

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Abstract

The English final examination is no longer a high-stake test since National Examination (NE) was abolished in 2021 and replaced with the *Ujian Satuan Pendidikan* (USP). Therefore, this study explores the washback effects experienced by Indonesian EFL teachers and students and discovers teachers' and students' perceptions of the implementation of USP. Six participants, three Indonesian English Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, and three Public Vocational High School students in Singosari were interviewed to meet the research goals. The findings indicated that focusing on teaching to the test, cheating, and feelings and attitudes were the washback effects of the English final examination in implementing USP. Then, the English final examination still harms the teaching and learning process and teachers' and students' feelings and attitudes, even though it is not a high-stake test. Besides, the implementation of USP also reduces the washback effect of the English final examination.

Keywords: Washback effect, final examination, teachers' and students' voices

Introduction

In the fields of education and applied linguistics, testing is widely assumed to have an impact on teaching and learning. Tests are measurement instruments used for a variety of purposes. However, the introduction of tests at every level of an educational system causes many conscious or unconscious modifications in the educational system, particularly in the teaching and learning process (Damankesh, 2015). Tests can limit learners' learning scope by requiring them to study only the components of the materials that are set to take place on the tests (Dong, 2020). Furthermore, tests influence teachers' methodological practices since it forces teachers to use the "teach to test approach" in the classroom. The materials used will also be test-bound, and enhancing students' scores takes precedence over achieving learning objectives across the education system.

By 2021, the government confirms that the National Examination (NE) and the equivalence examination will not be a requirement for graduation or selection to enter a higher education level. Thus, the examinations administered in the *Ujian Satuan Pendidikan* (USP) aim to assess the achievement of graduate competency standards for all subjects. The examination is carried out according to the curriculum used by the education unit. It can be carried out in even and odd semesters by the respective educational unit (The Regulation of the Minister of National Education, number 1, the year 2021).

Some evidence suggests that the examinations negatively impact teaching and learning (Alderson and Wall, 1993). The degree of washback differs depending on the test's status, the language being tested's status, the test's goal, the abilities examined, and the test's genre (Shohamy et al., 1996). Eckstein and Noah (1993) state that most washback research has concentrated on the reward or punishment of standardized tests; however, washback occurs in any evaluation results that affect the test takers' current prospect of learning and development. Furthermore, the examination was considered a high-stakes test.

Many linguists in their works have mentioned this term. Hughes (1989) argues that washback is undoubtedly the effect of testing on teaching and learning. The term "washback" is used by Shohamy (1992) to describe the use of extraneous language tests to influence and drive the language learning process in the educational context. She emphasizes that this phenomenon is a consequence of external testing and the significant influence it has on the lives of examinees. Biggs (1995) comes up with the term "backwash" to describe how testing influences not just the curriculum but also teaching practices and students' learning styles. Then, Safa and Goodarzi (2014) define washback as the level whereby the test affects language teachers and learners to do things they will not do otherwise. He provides a crucial dimension to washback by

stating that proof of teaching and learning effects should only be construed as washback if it can be interconnected to the test's introduction and use.

Washback effects can be positive and negative. Positive washback will occur when examination tests that affect teaching and learning have benefits and testing methods promote strong teaching practices (Alderson & Wall, 1993). In addition, Munoz (2017) focuses on four aspects to ensure positive washback effects: language learning goals, testing authenticity, student autonomy, self-assessment, and test result feedback. When the content of a test or format is predicated on a restrictive definition of language ability, negative washback might occur (Zhan & Wan, 2014). Furthermore, it limits the teaching/learning environments. Notably, negative washback negatively influences the teaching and learning of a particular test. It indicates a terrible test in which the instructor or student is unwilling to teach or learn something, as well as an incompatibility between the content (e.g., the material/abilities taught) and the test (Umam & Zabidi, 2021).

Over the years, the washback effect has long been a concern for language testing researchers, and much research has been conducted in this area (e.g., Safa & Goodarzi, 2014; Reynolds et al., 2018; Shirzadi & Amerian, 2020; and Ramezaney, 2014). However, those previous studies explore the washback effects using quantitative research. According to Xie (2015), the lack of comprehension may be partly due to the barriers to the qualitative research method used in most published studies. Then, he adds that the quantitative method effectively examined the correlation between variables but did not recognize numerous aspects influencing the washback effects. To address the research gap, this current study will qualitatively investigate the washback effects of USP on the teaching and learning process.

Then, the researchers are interested in carrying out this study since some studies have revealed that there were many adverse washback effects of the English final examination, especially on National Examination as a high-stake test (Afrianto, 2011; Friska & Setiawan, 2018; Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011; Endriyati & Anggraeni, 2019; Indrawati, 2018). However, the government has replaced the National Examination with the USP, where the assessment came from various forms such as portfolios, assignments, and other forms of assessment activities determined by the school. In addition, the final examination is no longer categorized as a high-stake test. Therefore, the researchers seek to discover whether the English final examination still has adverse washback effects or it has positive ones. Then, this study also investigates teachers' and students' voices towards implementing USP.

Method

This study discussed washback effects based on teachers' and students' perceptions. It used a qualitative approach, i.e., qualitative descriptive. According to Doyle (2020), qualitative descriptive research generates data that explains the who, what, and where of events or experiences from a subjective standpoint. This study was conducted with three experienced Indonesian English teachers and three students of a vocation high school in Singosari, Malang. The participant recruitment used a purposive sampling. Purposive sampling refers to the process of selecting research participants who are knowledgeable about the study aims and have prior experience with the issue under inquiry (Ritchie et al., 2014). In order to get the information, the researchers used the semi-structured interview as an instrument. An interview enabled the researcher to gather open-ended data, explore deeply into personal and often sensitive matters, and investigate participant ideas, feelings, and opinions about a specific topic (Dejonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). Then, the participants answer the interview questions through Google Form. Furthermore, the interview was carried out in Bahasa to prevent misunderstandings between the researchers and the participants. In addition, each participant was assigned a code such as T for teachers and S for students. In this study, the researchers employed a qualitative method that included three data analysis techniques: organizing and familiarizing data, coding and reducing, and interpreting and representing (Ary et al., 2010).

Findings and Discussion

This study investigated the final examination's washback effects and the teachers' and students' perceptions of USP. Firstly, the impact investigated during the interviews has three dimensions: the influence of the test on instructions and curriculum, the impact on teachers, and the impact on students. Transcripted interviews revealed some recognized negative and positive impacts of the USP as seen by teachers and students. The following are the washback effects of English final examination:

Teaching and learning process

According to the evidence gathered, USP has caused teachers to teach to the test. The intensity of the washback is strong because English final Examination has a strong effect and determines everything happened in the classroom, and lead all teachers to teach in the same way toward the examination. Teachers and students engaged in teaching and learning activities such as familiarizing students with the test format, discussing the questions, and teaching the assessed materials. We cannot estimate a student's English competency only on the basis of their English score on the final examination. A student who receives a high score after being exposed to items from the English final test extensively through item-teaching activities may have weak basic

English competency. On the other hand, because the teacher does not use itemsteaching, a specific student with reasonably excellent English proficiency may receive a lower score. As a result, the student is unfamiliar with the test mechanism. The participants recounted:

T1: I focus more on teaching the material to be tested. My reason is that students have limited time to prepare themselves as well as possible.

T2: I explain the material according to the exam grid.

T3: I use the practice book questions, then Give practice exam questions. In addition to discussing questions, I help the children master the existing reading materials. It will help them to improve their vocabulary.

In the implementation of USP, the test consists of 40 multiple-choice items and five questions in the form of an essay. As a result, students were given practice with examples of multiple-choice test items that were expected to appear on the examination. Endrivati and Anggraeni (2019) also found that Teachers typically assign practice or multiple choice questions. Almost all assessments, including the final exam, midterm, and tryout, are multiple choice. The pupils are asked the same sorts of questions as many times as they are able. This implies that students were taught examination tactics rather than gaining and developing the information and abilities needed to communicate effectively in the target language (Effendi & Suyudi, 2017). It contradicted current theories of language learning. Language learning seeks to help learners gain and improve information and abilities in the target language of listening, reading, speaking, and writing. It will enable students to operate successfully in real-life situations in which the target language is the main way of communication (Huges, 2012).

Then, the data revealed that teachers applied some strategies in teaching to face the English final examination. Teachers recounted:

T1:We discuss the examination questions and review the material so that students are better prepared for their examination.

T2: I repeat the material according to the grid of questions students do not understand.

T3: My strategy is introducing students to several techniques such as scanning and skimming, as well as how to find points as the key to the problems they will face.

Drilling, forum group discussion, question and answer, and scanning and skimming were the strategies used by the teachers during the preparation of USP. In facing USP, teachers adjusted their teaching technique to USP preparation, with classroom activities primarily focused on test practice. It demonstrates that the final examination negatively impacts teachers' teaching methods because teachers will employ whatever approach they believe would assist them in preparing their students for the final English examination. In her study, Indrawati (2018) found that teachers used some strategies, such as drilling, test-taking, and exercises. According to Sukyadi and Mardiani (2011), the major activity in the classroom is "teaching to the test" or "practicing the test." The teachers worked on ENE materials, discussed prior ENE examinations, and mostly exercised listening skills that will be examined in ENE.

In term of assessment, all teachers conveyed the same perspective. They said:

T1 and T2: In addition to the presentation of answers, other points to pay attention to are attendance, behavior, and grades other than test scores (Assignments, practice, and others).

T3: The four criteria for determining student graduation are adjusting the entire learning program, obtaining a minimum good attitude/behavior score, having school exam scores, and obtaining the minimum passing standard value set by the Education Unit.

According to teachers, in terms of content, literacy and numeracy evaluations focus on what teachers should teach in each class and education level. However, the test is not designed to assess students' comprehension of the curricular topics. Teachers are constantly at the forefront of language assessment design, development, and application. As a result, they must be knowledgeable with and skilled in the use of language evaluation (Rahman et al. 2021). Essentially, teachers assessed students using various data sources such as daily interactions with students and their examination results, assignments, attendance, attitudes, and others. Furthermore, each school's curriculum may change since each has the authority to establish a curriculum that aligns with the student's vision and characteristics. It was contrary to Sukyadi and Mardiani's (2011) findings. They found that English National Examination (ENE) and pre-ENE became the way of assessment.

Cheating on the final examination

On the implementation of USP, The examination has motivated some Indonesian students to cheat during the examination. Regarding this, teachers recounted:

T1: Teachers were not cheating, but the students still cheated in answering the test.

T2, T3: Cheating is usually done by students, such as cooperation, giving answers, and others. The supervisors are less willing to care about students' honesty. They allow students to be dishonest. Besides, the USP is already better than the previous types of graduation exams, but the questions on the USP are too easy, so they often leak.

Besides, students also revealed that there was still cheating during the examination.

S1: The implementation is smooth without being constrained by the network or other things. Of course, there is cheating in the exams that students do, such as cheating.

S2 and S3: some students were cheating.

On the implementation of USP, students sometimes still cheated during the English final examination. Unfairness in the passing grade standards has also led to cheating during the final examination in Indonesia. Cheating was impacted by a lack of self-confidence, time constraints, customs, parental expectations, peer pressure, teacher pressure, inefficient instruction, and a lack of punishments (Panjaitan, 2017). Teachers admitted that students were cheating since they needed to meet the standard to pass the test. Furthermore, the participants also revealed that the teachers did no cheating, but some of the examination supervisors still ignored cheating committed by students. Interestingly, based on the result of this study, it was found that there was no cheating done by teachers or even the school itself. It was contrary to the NE, where many cheating activities were found during the examination. Leaking answer keys and cooperation between school institutions and exam supervisors are cheating on National Examination (Friska & Setiawan, 2018). Then Puspitasari (2020) also claims that the concept of teachers doing all possible to help their students succeed the exam can be understood in ways not commonly seen in washback literature. Schools and teachers are often compelled to go to extraordinary lengths to assist their students achieve better score on national examinations. Then, another study from Siamuzyulu (2022) revealed that Learners were cheating regarding tests, and as a result, the majority of students graduated from high school with no competences that could support them in life. This suggests that students lacked confidence in their ability to achieve in life.

Teachers' and students' feelings and attitudes towards USP

The data showed that two teachers do not feel anxious or under pressure. They recounted:

T1: I feel uncomfortable, but when I have to give a score, I feel uncomfortable because there is a request to give a score far above the Minimum Mastery Criteria.

T2: The demand that I may feel is that I tend to worry if my students are still very poorly prepared. Therefore, I always offer the opportunity for students to learn every time and everywhere. We can discuss the material outside the class, especially by using WhatsApp.

Although USP is not a high-stakes test, the teacher did not face some negative feelings during the English final examination; however, some of them also experienced the uncomfortable feeling. This feeling was also fueled by the fact that school principals and parents have high expectations for teachers to help students in passing the test. Consequently, Teachers reported feeling uncomfortable and anxious if their students failed the test. They were concerned about being labeled as unsuccessful teachers if many students failed the examination.

Surprisingly, other teachers revealed a contradicting perspective. Teachers revealed that they did not experience negative feelings too much. They said:

T3: I don't feel pressured at all. That's because the material is prepared with other teachers, making it more comfortable. I am passionate about being an example to my students.

T4: No.. everything has been prepared ahead of time. I will be well prepared for the exam.

It might be due to the implementation of USP. It is in line with Sutari (2017) who found that the teacher in her study, the national examination is no longer a high-stakes test. The policy adjustment that eliminated the use of the national examination as the only criterion for graduation did not appear to impact teachers' perceptions of the national examination as a high-stakes test. Therefore, teachers claimed that they

have less negative feelings. Since the National Examination was no longer the requirement for graduation, the teachers created the tests. However this result is contrary with the study by Afrianto (2011), who discovered that teachers experienced more stress and anxiety during the National Examination. Because of the test was high stakes, teachers have felt anxious and under pressure to perform teaching activities before the test day.

Then, based on students' points of view, they said they also experienced anxiety during preparing for USP.

S1: The feeling towards the preparation is quite comfortable. However, when I face the examination, I feel anxious.

S2 and S3: I am anxious. I am afraid I can not answer the question during the examination.

The finding of this study is in line with Endrivati and Anggraeni (2019), who found that two students clarify that most of their students are anxious. They believe that the questions on the examination are highly challenging. They are concerned about their poor performance. Then a participant stated that the students are still confused and insecure. They have mastered more than half of the curriculum. As a result, it required motivation from both teachers and parents. According to Sulistyaningsih and Sugiman (2016), students with high anxiety are likely to be apprehensive and unable to focus when confronted with a threatening situation and a national test. Students with less anxiety are more aware of circumstances such as national examinations and can anticipate them. In addition, students who spend more time preparing for the exam would have less anxiety than others (Sato, 2019). In addition, Chen et al. (2020) revealed that some students expressed concern during the interview that they would not be able to answer the NMET questions because they were drawn from the most challenging section of the curriculum material they studied.

Teachers' and students' voices towards USP

Discussing about the impacts on the implementation of USP or final examination, it leads into positive and negative way. The following are teachers perceptions of USP.

T1 : I enjoy teaching my students to prepare their exam. Through USP, I know their progress and I can measure it.

T2: I think USP can make my students less anxious because the test is arranged by the school itself, so they know what topic and material are going to be tested.

According to studies, examination had an impact on students' learning. Students had to study for longer as a result (Efendi & Suyudi, 2017). Different from standardized National Examination that considered as high stakes test, USP provides more opportunity for the students in measuring their English proficiency. Due to the implementation of USP is carried out by the institutional unit, it is easy for the institution to observe the students' progress. The teachers believed that USP is an effective way to ensure that students are understanding what is being taught to them. The implementation of USP also leads the teachers in delivering the material easily. They can increase the students' exposure to the materials and help them fully understand the lesson. Then, students revealed that USP provides many positive impacts. The implementation of USP also decreased cheating. They also argued that there was no negative effects of USP. They recounted:

S1: The assessment does not only depend on the final examination, but it is based on many aspects, such as assignment and others. I think USP has no negative effect.

S2 and S2: Cheating has decreased considerably since the USP was implemented.

On the other hand, the teachers found the negative effects of USP. They said:

T1 : *My* students seem less anxious and don't have enough preparation.

T2 and T3 : I think some of the students are not serious because the test is not challenging as before.

The students are lack motivation in learning. It is because USP is non standardized and high-stake test. As a result, students frequently can not achieve the good score in the examination. Penk et al. (2014) discovered that different motivating features of test-taking motivation had a little affect on performance in low-stakes exams. These findings showed that students are more likely to earn greater test performance when they put in more effort and have less anxiety throughout the examination process.

Conclusion

In short, the implementation of USP changes the way of teaching and learning process during the preparation for the English final examination. Teachers mostly teach

the subject tested, and assess the students throughout students' attendance, assignments, attitudes, and examination. Other than that, teachers implemented various strategies in teaching, such as drilling, forum group discussion, and question and answers. Then, even though some negative washback effects still occur on the English final examination, the implementation of USP reduces the high rate of cheating during the examination. Then, both teachers and students did not experience severe stress since there was no pressure to pass the test from the school as well as parents. It is because the English final examination is not categorized as a high-stake test.

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