



The Role of Washback-Based Approach of the Achievement Test on Enhancing EFL Learners' Proficiency

(A Case Study of First Year Secondary School Students in Saudi Arabia)

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at investigating the role of washback- based of the achievement test on enhancing the EFL proficiency. The study adopts a descriptive method to analyze and verify the results in which frequencies, percentages, means and their standard deviation were used. The analysis was carried out through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) technique. The sample of the study comprises of 30 teachers of EFL to express their opinions on the statements of the questionnaire. One tool has been used for collecting data relevant to the study, a questionnaire to teachers of EFL to provide answers to study question and hypothesis. After tabulating and analyzing the data of the study through the questionnaire, the results have shown great improvements in the performance of learners and the study has come up with main findings that revealed the positive role of washback-based approach of the achievement test on enhancing EFL learners' proficiency. The study offered some recommendations and suggestions for further studies that encourage the EFL learners to be aware of the positive influence of washback-based approach of the achievement test in developing the learning process.

Key words: analyze, investigate, opinion, performance,

Introduction

It is a common belief that testing affects teaching and learning, as stated by Alderson and Wall (1993) that "tests are held to be powerful determiners of what happens in classroom". The way in which examinations influence teaching and learning is commonly described as "washback" or "backwash". A number of definitions have been proposed for the term "washback" throughout the published research and literature on language testing. This study starts with a focus on the various definitions of backwash or washback. Next, it examines the similar concept terms defined by other researchers. By reviewing the variety of definitions, the researcher's own view of washback will be reached. Comes after that are the explorations of different types of washback. The studies end with drawing pedagogical implications for EFL teachers.

Literature Review

Definitions of Washback

The notion of "washback" is prevalent in language teaching and testing literature, but it is seldom found in dictionaries. Some writers used the term "washback" while others preferred "backwash" to describe the effects or influences brought by tests or examinations. Below, the definitions by various researchers are arranged under the groupings of backwash or washback.

**Backwash**

- Hughes (1989:1): "The effect of testing on teaching and learning" is known as backwash.
- Spolsky (1994): The concept of backwash deals with the unforeseen side-effects of testing and not to the intended effects when the primary goal of the examination is the control of curricula.
- Biggs (1995): Backwash refers to the fact that testing controls not only the curriculum but also teaching methods and students' learning strategies

Washback

- Alderson & Wall (1993): Washback compels "teachers and learners to do things they would not necessarily otherwise do because of the test".
- Messick (1996): Washback is described as "the extent to which the introduction and the use of a test influences language and teachers to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning".
- Bailey (1996): Washback is the "influence of testing on teaching and learning."
- Shohamy, et al. (1996): Washback is delineated as "the connections between testing and learning".
- Pearson (1988): "Public examinations influence the attitudes, behaviors, and motivation of teachers, learners, and parents, and because examinations often come at the end of a course, this influence is seen working in a backward direction, hence the term, washback".
- Cheng (2005): Washback indicates "an intended or unintended (accidental) direction and function of curriculum change on aspects of teaching and learning by means of a change of public examinations ."

Similar Concept Terms to Washback

In addition to "backwash" and "washback", researchers used other similar terms stated below to investigate the phenomena of the influences or effects of tests on the educational field.

- a) **Test Impact:** (Andrews 2004, [9]; McNamara, 2000 [10]; Wall, 1997 [11]; Bachman & Palmer, 1996 [12]). Some researchers have argued that tests can have more far-reaching effects in the educational world than just in the language classroom. Bachman & Palmer (1996) used the term "test impact" to refer to the effects that tests have on individuals (teachers and students) or educational systems and on the society at large. Wall (1997) held a similar view by stating that "Test impact refers to any of the effects that a test may have on individuals, policies or practices within the classroom, the school, the educational system, and society as a whole". He also claimed that "Tests can also have effects beyond the classroom. The wider effect of tests on the community as a whole, including the school, is referred to as test impact". Andrews (2004) used "test impact" to describe "the effects of tests on teaching and learning, the educational system, and the various stake holders in the education process".
- b) **Systemic Validity:**(Frederickson& Collins, 1989) Systemic validity refers to the effects of instructional changes brought about by the introduction the test into an educational system as stated tests induce "in the education system curricular and instructional changes that foster cognitive skills that the test is designed to measure".



- c) **Consequential Validity:** Messick (1989, 1996) Consequential validity encompasses concepts ranging from the uses of tests, the impacts of testing on testtakers and teachers, the examination of results by decision makers, and the potential misuse, abuse, and unintended usage of tests. In other words, consequential validity implies that tests have various influences both within and beyond the classroom. In other words, consequential validity refers to the societal implications of testing that are only one facet of a broader, unified concept of test validity.

Shohamy contended that “the use of external tests as a device for creating: “the educational process is often referred to as the washback effect or measurement-driven instruction”.

- d) **Curriculum-alignment:** Shohamy et al (1996) defined curriculum alignment as “the curriculum is modified according to test results”.
- e) **Washback Validity:** Morrow (1986) “In essence, an examination of washback validity would take testing researchers into the classroom in order to observe the effect of their tests in action.” In other words, washback validity deals directly with the extent to which the test meets the needs of students, educators, researchers, administrators of tests, and anyone who uses the test results in the future. In addition, washback validity refers to the value of the relationship between the test and any associated teaching

Definition of Washback in this Study

After reviewing definitions of washback, the term can be defined according to two major perspectives: one at a narrower view within the classroom at a micro level, and the other at a wider and more holistic view beyond the classroom at a macro level.

As suggested by Bachman & Palmer (1996), washback, at a macro level, refers to the extent to which a test influences within the society, ranging from government policymaking, school administration, publishing, and general opportunities, to parents’ expectations of their children. At a micro level, washback refers to the extent to which a test influences within the classroom, mainly in the change or innovation of curricula and teachers’ methodologies and the influence of students’ learning. Bailey (1996) used the phrase “washback to the learners” to indicate the effects of test on students, and “washback to the programme” to indicate effects of test on teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, counselors, etc.

To summarize, the narrower definition of washback focuses on the effects that a test has on teaching and learning. The wider or more holistic view of washback (also defined as test impact) looks beyond the classroom to the educational systems and society at large. All in all, tests can have “significant impact not only on individuals but also on practices and policies—in the classroom, the school, the educational system and in society as a whole” Wall (2005).

In this study, a broader interpretation of washback will be adopted: washback at a macro level beyond the classroom to investigate the test washback in the school, the educational system and society as a whole, and washback at a micro level within the classroom to investigate the test washback in the classroom, that is, the washback effect of teaching and learning.

Types of Washback

Generally, washback can be analyzed according to two major types: positive and negative, depending on whether it has a beneficial or harmful impact on educational practices Hughes (1989). This section explores positive and negative washback in terms of both the classroom setting and the educational/political system .

**A. Positive Washback****Classroom Setting**

Teachers and learners will be motivated to fulfil their teaching and learning goals (Anderson & Wall, 1993). Good tests can be utilized and designed as beneficial teaching-learning activities so as to encourage a positive teaching-learning process Pearson (1988:107).

A creative and innovative test can quite advantageously result in a syllabus alteration or a new syllabus Davis (1985 [18])

Educational/Societal System

Decisional makers use the authority power of high-stakes testing to achieve the goals of teaching and learning, such as the introduction of new textbooks and new curricula Shohamy (1992 [15]; Wall & Alderson 1993 [1]; Cheng; 2005 [8]). Tests are encouraged to promote the idea of lifelong learning and encourage people to learn English (Language Testing and Training Centre, 2008) .

B. Negative Washback**Classroom Setting**

The test will lead to the narrowing of content in the curriculum. What students have learned is test language, instead of total phases of understanding Shohamy (1992). Teachers tend to ignore subjects and activities that are not directly related to passing the exam, and tests accordingly alter the curriculum in a negative way Vernon (1956). The tests may well fail to create a correspondence between the learning principles and/or the course objectives to which they should be related (Cheng, 2005). Many teachers detailed high anxiety, fear and pressure to cover the material, as they felt that their job performance was assessed by students' test scores. Educators experienced negative reactions to the stress brought about by public displays of classroom scores. Inexperienced teachers felt a greater degree of anxiety and pressure for accountability than did teachers with more experience Fish (1988 [19]). "Testing programs substantially reduce the time available for instruction, narrow curricular offerings and modes 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" (Smith, 1991 [20]). An increasing number of paid coaching classes are set up to prepare students for exams, but what students learn are test-taking skills rather than language learning activities Wiseman (1961). Measurement-driven instruction will definitely result in cramming, narrowing the curriculum, focus of attention on those skills that are most relevant to testing, placement of constraints on teachers' and students' creativity and spontaneity, and disparage the professional judgment of educators Madaus (1988)

Educational/Societal System

Decision makers overwhelmingly use tests to promote their political agendas and to seize influence and control of educational systems Shohamy (1996). Tests are used as a "lever" for change. To present a clear view of positive and negative washback at both micro-level (classroom settings) and at macro-level (educational and societal system),

To summarize, in terms of the classroom setting at a micro level, the positive washback integrates meaningful and innovative learning activities in teachers' educational methodologies, and thus educators will devote more attention to students' intentions, interests, and choices. Students at the same time will be encouraged and motivated to work harder. On the other hand, the negative washback is that teachers will



usually teach to the test, narrow the curriculum and only focus on what will be tested. Moreover, cramming will be the washback brought by measurement-driven tests, even though there is an ongoing debate as to whether cramming is positive or negative washback. In terms of educational setting, the positive washback is that the authority can use the test to attain its goal of teaching and learning. However, the negative washback is that the authority uses that goal to control and obtain the power of the academic system that will usually place undue pressure and anxiety on school staffs, teachers and even students. In other words, the washback on the side of the educational setting is one coin with two sides, depending on the stakeholder's point of view.

Pedagogical Implications of Washback

By analyzing the possible positive and negative washback that tests might bring about at micro and macro levels, it seems that teachers play an important role in fostering different types of washback. In other words, the beliefs of the teachers are a critical factor in determining the washback effect. For example, a test, on one hand, will encourage some teachers to think it's important to plan their curricula carefully to meet the needs of the test, but on the other hand, other teachers may think that tests force them to teach what they don't find suitable or appropriate for students. Spratt (2005) has stated that the teacher plays a significant role in determining the types and intensity of washback, and thus, teachers have become the sources of promoting positive washback. Chapman and Snyder J. (2000:462) have expressed a similar view by stating that "it is not the examination itself that influences teachers' behavior, but teachers' beliefs about those changes". As Watanbee (2005) suggested, teachers should be provided with in-service training and be familiar with a wide range of teaching methods.

Tests sometimes are used by schools or school administrations as a "lever" to introduce the innovation of new curricula, but it may change the format of what teachers instruct, not foster an in-depth change of teaching methodologies as a whole. As Wall (2005:283) stated, "examinations cannot influence teachers to change their practices if they are not committed to the new ideas and if they do not have the skills that will enable them to experiment with, evaluate and make appropriate adjustments to new methods". In other words, teachers themselves must conduct the changes and teachers need to have the necessary skills to adapt the changes. Again, teachers play a very crucial role in promoting positive washback or hindering negative washback.

To conclude, there are two major perspectives that teachers should bear in mind. If we are the ones who make the tests, we should try to make a match between what is tested and what is taught by using more direct testing, making sure the test is known by students. Tests are one factor that will lead the teacher to "teach to the test", and what students learn might be discrete points of language, not the communicative part of language they need in real life. To remedy this, it is desirable to use authentic and direct tests Bailey (1996). If we are responsible for helping students pass the test, we should try our best to learn more teaching methodologies by taking more training courses, engage in peer observations and utilizing the tests to enhance students' learning while at the same time not inhibiting students' motivation by cramming too much.

As teachers, "we may have limited power to influence high-stakes national and international examinations, but we do have tremendous power to lead students to learn, to teach them language and how to work with tests and test results." Bailey (2005) All in all, it's the teacher who has the most power to turn it into positive or negative washback.

Statement of the Study Problem

In recent years, the impact of major tests and examinations on language teaching and learning has become an area of significant interest for testers and teachers alike. One aspect of test impact is washback,



which is traditionally described as the negative effects that result from a test. It is said to create a narrowing of the curriculum in the classroom so that teachers and learners focus solely on the areas to be tested. On the other hand, there have been attempts to generate positive washback by means of examination reform to encourage teachers and learners to adopt more modern communicative approaches to language learning. The test that is the subject of the present study is the achievement test, which has become one of the preferred method of assessing the EFL learners who are seeking admission into further education or employment opportunities. Courses which claim to prepare students for the test have become an increasingly common feature of the programs offered by both private and public-sector language schools.

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Investigate the impact of washback-based approach of the achievement test on developing the EFL learning process at Qatif Secondary School.
2. explain how washback-based approach of the achievement test can promote EFL

Question of the Study

The current study attempts to answer the following question:

How can the washback-based approach of the achievement test promote EFL learners' proficiency?

Hypothesis of the Study

This study tries to find out respondents' reaction to this hypothesis:

Washback-based approach of the achievement test can promote EFL learners' proficiency.

Significance of the Study

The importance of investigating more about washback-based approach of the achievement test is crucial. Firstly, this study provides some of the needed knowledge and understanding to help future teachers and language test developers to design instruction and tests that properly account for washback. Secondly, language classroom teacher has a vested interest in knowing how washback affects the learning process, and how to best recognize the effects of washback-based approach, either positive or negative, on her/his teaching. Thirdly, learning more about washback in this environment has important implications for teacher education programs that are designed to train new instructors, to introduce valuable classroom techniques and strategies, and to review important issues in the development of course syllabi and teaching materials. It is hoped that this study will be of great value to teachers of English language and students of Qatif Secondary School in Saudi Arabia in particular in dealing with investigation into the washback-based approached effects on EFL achievement tests. It is also hoped that the findings of this study might be useful to teachers of English as a foreign language in general.

Limits of the Study

This study is limited:

1. Limits of Title: The subject of the study was about Washback-based Approach of the Achievement Test: Assessing the Learning Process.
2. Limits of Place: The study was applied and carried out at First Secondary School in the Eastern Region of Saudi Arabia as a case study.



3. limits of Time: The study was carried out and applied during the academic year: 2016/2017).

Methodology of the Study

The data were analyzed through a descriptive method in which frequencies, percentages, means and their standard deviations are used to interpret the methods. The analysis was carried out through the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).Alpha-Cronbach coefficient Equation was used for calculating the validity and the reliability of the questionnaire.

Population and Sampling

The researcher has drawn the population for this study exclusively from teachers of English as a foreign language who were selected for the administration of the questionnaire to check the role of washback-based approach of the achievement test on assessing the learning process. A sample of (30) teachers was randomly selected for this paper.

Tool of Data Collection

The researcher has used questionnaire as a tool in the collection of relevant data and information in pursuing this paper. The questionnaire was given to teachers of English as a foreign language in the Eastern Region of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia whom were selected randomly to support the question of this paper.

Question and Hypothesis of the study

The researcher presented and discussed the results of the study according to following question and hypothesis:

- 1. Question:** How can the washback-based approach of the achievement test promote EFL learners' proficiency?
- 2. Hypothesis:** Washback-based approach of the achievement test can promote EFL learners' proficiency.

Analysis and Discussion of the Study Tool

This item tries to elicit information from the teachers concerning their views about the role of washback-based approach of the achievement test in developing EFL learning process. After tabulating and analyzing the data of the study through the questionnaire, the results are shown in the following tables and figures:

Statement No. (1): Teachers are aware of the objectives of the syllabus and curriculum.

Table 1: The Frequency Distribution for the Respondent's Answers of **Statement No (1)**

Valid	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	30	100
Neutral	0	0
Disagree	0	0
Total	30	100%

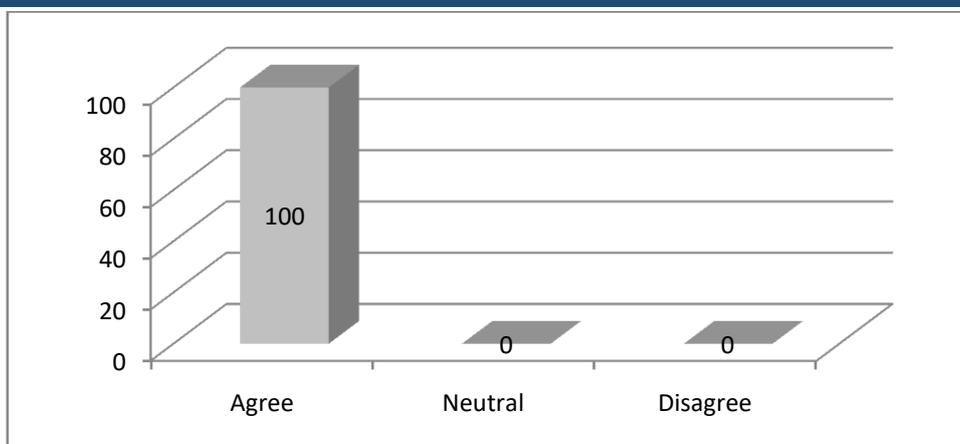


Figure (1)

It is obvious from the above table and figure show that there are (30) respondents in the study sample with percentage (100%) agreed with that “Teachers are aware of the objectives of the syllabus and curriculum.”, and (0) respondents with percentage (0%) were neutral and (0) respondents with percentage (0%) disagreed.

Statement No. (2): The present syllabus and curriculum can enhance EFL learning process

Table 2: The Frequency Distribution for the Respondents’ Answers of **Statement No (2)**

Valid	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	27	90
Neutral	3	10
Disagree	0	0
Total	30	100%

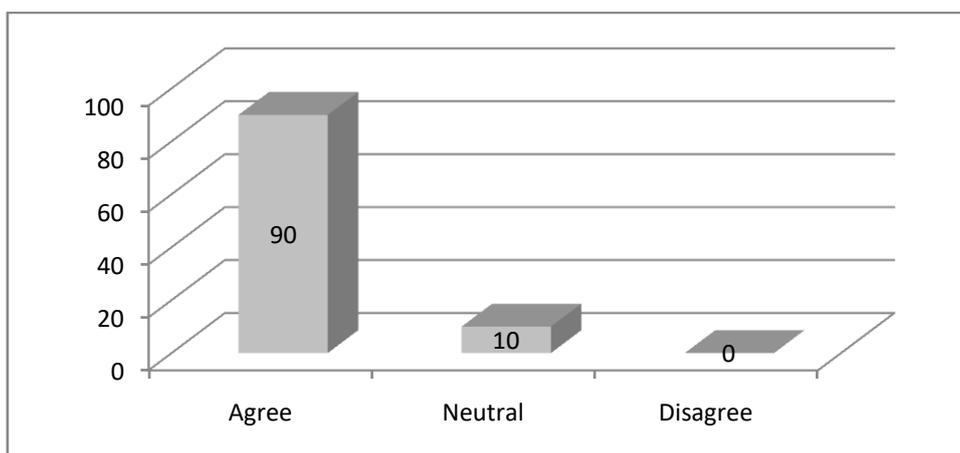


Figure (2)

It is obvious from the above table and figure show that there are (27) respondents in the study sample with percentage (90%) agreed with that " The present syllabus and curriculum can enhance EFL learning process". and (3) respondents with percentage (10%) were neutral and (0) respondents with percentage (0%) disagreed.

Statement No. (3):Teachers teach every section in the textbook (*Traveller*) although some sections are unlikely to be tested in the examination.



Table 3: The Frequency Distribution for the Respondents' Answers of **Statement No (3)**

Valid	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	22	73.3
Neutral	8	26.7
Disagree	0	0
Total	30	100%

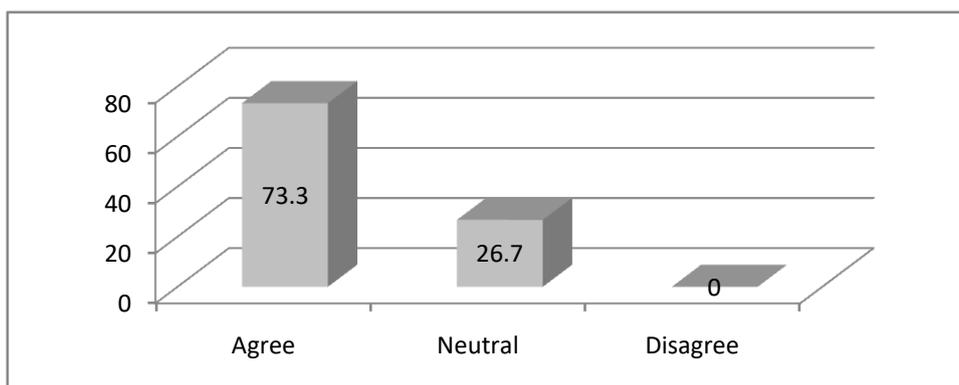


Figure (3)

It is obvious from the above table and figure show that there are (22) respondents in the study sample with percentage (73.3%) agreed with that " Teachers teach every section in the textbook (*Traveller*) although some sections are unlikely to be tested in the examination". and (8) respondents with percentage (26.7%) were neutral and (0) respondents with percentage (0%) disagreed.

Statement No. (4): Teachers do not care about the syllabus and curriculum while teaching my students.

Table 4: The Frequency Distribution for the Respondents' Answers of **Statement No (4)**

Valid	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	3	10
Neutral	4	13.3
Disagree	23	76.7
Total	30	100%

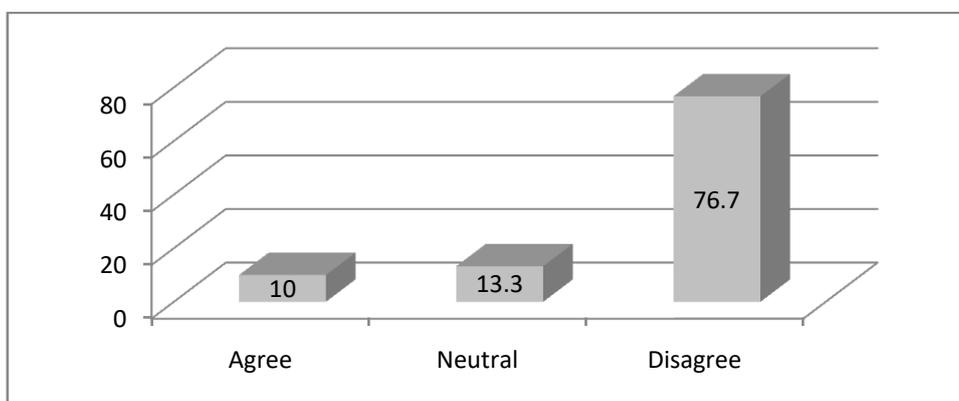


Figure (4)



It is obvious from the above table and figure show that there are (3) respondents in the study sample with percentage (10%) agreed with that "Teachers do not care about the syllabus and curriculum while teaching their students.". and (4) respondents with percentage (13.3%) were neutral and (23) respondents with percentage (76.7%) disagreed.

Statement No. (5): Teachers feel pressure to cover the syllabus before the final test.

Table 5: The Frequency Distribution for the Respondents' Answers of **Statement No (5)**

Valid	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	9	30
Neutral	11	36.7
Disagree	10	33.3
Total	30	100%

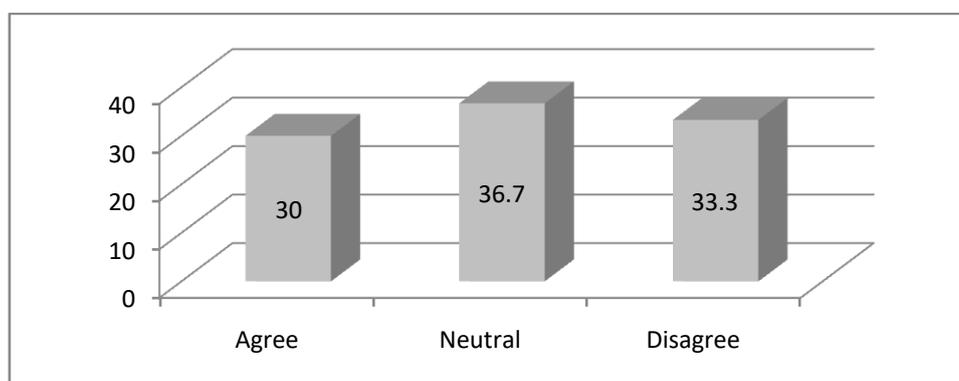


Figure (5)

It is obvious from the above table and figure show that there are (9) respondents in the study sample with percentage (30%) agreed with that "Teachers feel pressure to cover the syllabus before the final test.". and (11) respondents with percentage (36.7%) were neutral and (10) respondents with percentage (33.3%) disagreed.

Statement No. (6): The test tests the overall competence of my students in English (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).

Table 6: The Frequency Distribution for the Respondents' Answers of **Statement No (6)**

Valid	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	23	76.7
Neutral	6	20
Disagree	1	3.3
Total	30	100%

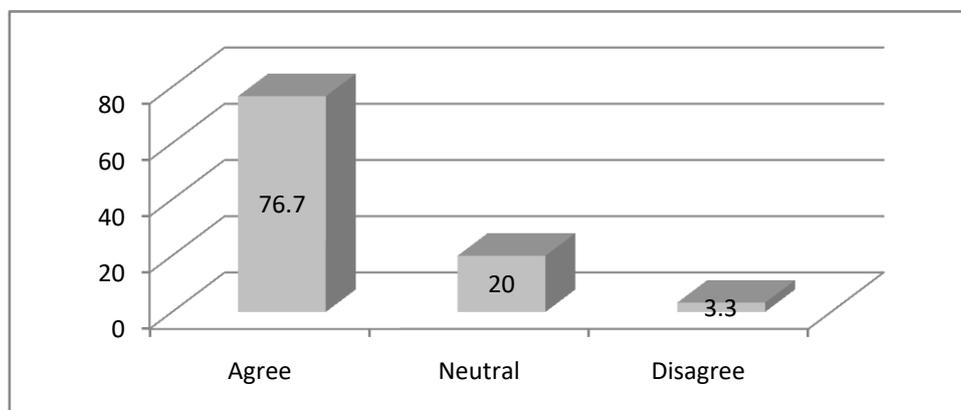


Figure (6)

It is obvious from the above table and figure show that there are (23) respondents in the study sample with percentage (76.7%) agreed with that “The test tests the overall competence of my students in English (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). ”. and (6) respondents with percentage (20%) were neutral and (1) respondents with percentage (3.3%) disagreed.

Statement No. (7):Teachers give more attention to teaching to the syllabus opposed to practicing the test items.).

Table 7: The Frequency Distribution for the Respondents’ Answers of **Statement No (7)**

Valid	Frequency	Percentage
Agree	11	36.7
Neutral	12	40
Disagree	7	23.3
Total	30	100%

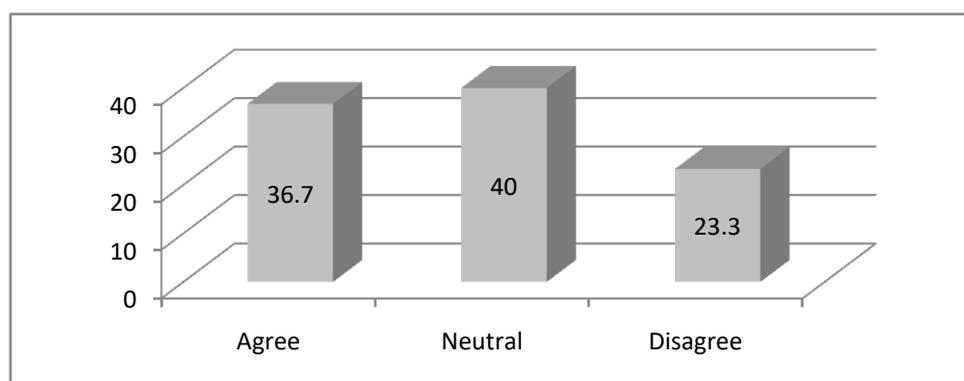


Figure (7)

It is obvious from the above table and figure show that there are (11) respondents in the study sample with percentage (36.7%) agreed with that “Teachers give more attention to teaching to the syllabus opposed to practicing the test items.” and (12) respondents with percentage (40%) were neutral and (7) respondents with percentage (23.3%) disagreed.

**Table 8:** Descriptive Statistics of Questionnaire for curriculum and Syllabus

No.	Statement	mean	SD	Chi square	p-value
1.	I am aware of the objectives of the syllabus and curriculum.	2.8	3.4	25	0.000
2.	The present syllabus and curriculum can enhance EFL learning process	2.5	1.5	19	0.000
3.	I teach every section in the textbook (Traveller) although some sections are unlikely to be tested in the examination.	2.4	0.9	31	0.000
4.	I do not care about the syllabus and curriculum while teaching my students.	2.9	1.6	25	0.000
5.	I feel pressure to cover the syllabus before the final test.	2.6	0.7	36	0.000
6.	The test tests the overall competence of my students in English (listening, speaking, reading, and writing).	2.7	1.5	23	0.000
7.	I give more attention to teaching to the syllabus opposed to practicing the test items.).	2.8	0.6	27	0.000

The calculated values of chi-square for the significance of the differences for the respondent's answers is greater than the tabulated value of chi-square at the degree of freedom (4) and the significant value level (5%) which was (12.0). This indicates that, there are statistically significant differences at the level (5%) among the answers of the respondents, and also the calculated means are greater than the hypothesized mean (2.3) which support the respondents who agreed with the study hypothesis "*Washback-based approach of the achievement test can promote EFL learners' proficiency*".

According to the previous results we can say that our hypothesis is accepted.

The results of the questionnaire

The results of the questionnaire that is shown in table (8) explains that the most frequent answer of the 30 respondents is (agree) to all statements and the total mean falls within the range of the answer (agree) according to Likert Scale measurement and the total result is (agree). This means the results of the questionnaire agree and support the study hypothesis that:

"Washback-based approach of the achievement test can promote EFL learners' proficiency".

Main Results

The researcher has discussed the results of the study and reached to the following out comes:

1. Teachers are aware of the objectives of the syllabus and curriculum.
2. It is believed that the test score in English is an appropriate indicator of a student's English ability.
3. Test scores are used by policy makers in education as tools to control admission, promotion, placement and graduation.
4. Washback is positive or negative depending on whether or not the test promoted the learners' language development.



Conclusion

This paper concluded the study by providing answers to the study question and verifying the hypothesis, it also summarized the main findings, recommendations and suggestions for further studies.

Recommendations

1. Learning more about washback in this environment has important implication for teacher education programs that are designed to train new instructors, to introduce valuable classroom techniques and strategies.
2. It is hoped that these findings might be useful to teachers and learners of EFL in terms of having enough background about the term washback effects on teaching and learning process.
3. Teachers should be responsible for helping their students overcome the obstacles they might face in language learning process
4. Whether the influences of testing on teaching and learning are positive or negative is still debatable and needs to be studied further

Suggestions for Further Studies

The researcher suggests the following topics that could be conducted by the other researchers:

- 1) The results of this study seem to indicate that there is a lack of research regarding washback approach and how this gap could be closed, therefore it deserves more attention.
- 2) Washback should be one of the most important criterion for developing and evaluating language test.
- 3) Understanding what types of beliefs lead to desired outcomes and what types of beliefs are stumbling blocks would be of use to help promote positive washback and minimize undesirable negative washback.
- 4) Using modern aids and equipment to teach and practice English language skills is of great value.

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