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THE COMPLEXITY OF WASHBACK EFFECT ON STUDENTS' LEARNING IN TOEFL PREPARATION COURSE

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Abstract

English language tests in Indonesia have been long established to measure English language proficiency, especially in higher education. Unlike the huge demand for English competency and the high number of language test takers, research on the washback effect or the effect of tests on language teaching and learning is still limited. This research aims to explore the washback effect found in student learning. This research uses a qualitative research design involving seven final year students from one university in Pontianak as participants. Researcher collected data through classroom observation and interview. This research focused on one type of English test, namely the TOEFL (Test Of English as a Foreign Language). The data collected was used to answer the nature of the TOEFL preparation course and a real picture of all the activities that occured during the learning process. The findings showed that there was a significant effect of the TOEFL and TOEFL preparation course on student learning experience specifically on the depth of learning. Despite the finding that TOEFL preparation course brought positive washback effect on students' learning, this research suggests higher education institution and teachers to keep providing better teaching and learning experience in test-oriented English class.

Keywords: English Language Test, Washback-effect; Students' Learning; TOEFL Course; Test-oriented English Class.

Introduction

In many parts of the world, English language has been used as a medium of communication (Sadeghpour & Sharifian, 2019). Not only used in academic field, in a work field, the capacity to use English is also one of the requirement to see the qualities of employees. This phenomenon might be one of the effects of globalisation found in community (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). It is becoming a common believe that the mastery of English could help anyone to gain access not only to successful careers but also to international friendships, further study abroad, new forms of technology and entertainment and to social and geographic mobility.

In countries where English is not the first language, getting a certificate or passing language test is mandatory for many occasions such as entering and graduating from school or for the job requirement (Menken et al., 2012). There are many types of English language test available in Indonesia namely IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC, Cambridge English, PLT, etc. These different types of English test are available to

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match the needs of different test takers (Chaipuapae, 2019). In Indonesia especially in higher education, TOEFL has been used in majority of univeristies (higher education) as a gate keeper and exit test (graduation requirement). Unfortunately, even with positive intention and careful planning, this policy and the test might result far from what it is intended and might show some "unpredictable" effects and results (Moher et al., 2012).

Testing has been a major topic that catches many researchers' attention simply because the use of test has been a significant aspect that affecting the curriculum, teaching and learning process even the society (Docktor & Mestre, 2014). McNamara (2000) defined the concept of an impact as "tests' effects on the whole educational system, while washback is the effects of test on teaching and learning." In Spratt (2005) study, it was concluded that besides the test itself, context, teachers and learners' characteristics including their perception and beliefs towards testing are considered variables that may contribute to the complexity of washback. In accordance to that idea, Alderson and Wall (1993) also stated that "washback is a complex and multidimensional phenomenon" that to identify the occurrence of washback on certain types of text, a specific study is needed to be done.

Test-oriented class or more specifically English test preparation class has been offered from variety of institution in order to help test takers to pass the English test. But again, although this class is carried out to bring a positive influence to the learners to gain knowledge on the format of the test as well as building their motivation in learning English, Richards & Renandya (1993) mentioned that this type of language learning would remove the "mixed-focus product and process model of language teaching and learning and focuses only on learners' test score".

Burrows (2004) set in the theory of washback that there is a "stimulus-response" relationship between teaching and testing. What Burrow meant by "stimulus-response" was that "washback is a definite by-product of a test and the quality of the test determines how teachers will all have similar changes in their teaching under the test influence, be it positive or negative. Hughes (1993) concluded the complexity of washback effect in relation to the teaching and learning environment as follow:

Table 1
The Trichotomy Backwash Model

a. Participants—students, classroom teachers, administrators, materials developers and publishers, whose perceptions and attitudes toward their work may be affected by a test
b. Processes—any actions taken by the participants which may contribute to the process of learning
c. Products-what is learned (facts, skills, etc) and the quality of the learning

Another study by Alderson and Wall (1993) concluded another theory that the concept of washback hold 15 types of hypotheses describe as follow:

Table 2
Washback Hypotheses

1. A test will influence teaching
2. A test will influence learning
3. A test will influence what teachers teach
4. A test will influence how teachers teach

5. A test will influence what learners learn
6. A test will influence how learners learn
7. A test will influence the rate and sequence of teaching
8. A test will influence the rate and sequence of learning
9. A test will influence the degree and depth of teaching
10. A test will influence the degree and depth of learning
11. A test will influence attitudes to the content, method of teaching and learning
12. Tests that have important consequences will have washback and conversely
13. Tests that do not have important consequences will have no washback.
14. Tests will have washback on all learners and teachers.
15. Tests will have washback effects for some learners and some teachers but not for others.

(Wall & Alderson, 1993)

Studies on washback have been long investigated and were used to focus on the teachers' stand point (Green, 2006). Later, some researchers were interested in investigating the possibility of washback on students' learning too. Some studies of the washback effect on learners' learning (Green, 2006; Shih & Lindley, 2006; Tsangari et al., 2016) found that testing does not only affect teachers' teaching but also students' learning. It was found that the effects found in learners were dynamic and varied on each individual. From Watanabe (2001), it was found that “the test of the appropriate difficulty can have a positive effect on students’ motivation to prepare for the test. However, it is the students’ perceived difficulty of the test that counts, not the objective difficulty. For this study, the researcher tries to limit the area of the study which was inspired by Alderson and Wall (1993) evaluation of "increased specification". The main focus of washback on students' learning experience mainly on the degree and depth of learning.

Combining ideas from the theory of trichotomy (Hughes, 1993), Bailey (1996) concluded "the notion of washback to the learners as the test-driven information provided to the test-takers and having a direct impact on them." As mentioned in the introduction, compared to the studies of washback on teachers, the study of washback on learner are still limited. Green (2006) who has been consistent in analyzing washback effect on learners concluded that "the differences between the course contents the learners expected to receive and the course outcomes showed that the differences were not driven by learner expectations, but by teachers' adoptions of distinctive aims on different course types". Green also mentioned that “teachers and the course may shape washback to the learners and their perceptions of tests and test preparations may differ from those of teachers.”

Based on the previous studies presented above, it is clear that the focus on some studies was different from the others. Some researchers focused on how test change learner's perception and some other researchers focused on the learning product which is the performance of learner in learning.

For this study, the researcher tries to limit the area of the study which was inspired by Alderson and Wall (1993) evaluation of "increased specification". The main focus of washback on learners' learning contains questions on "how", "rate and sequence" as well as "degree and depth". This investigation will lead to the answer for the last research questions of this study which is to define the dimension of washback effect on learners' learning.

Research Method

Morrow's (1986) once stated that "qualitative methods in language testing research are useful for "…researching into language testing...to glean insights into the ways in which multi-faceted individuals prepare for tests." For this reason, the researcher decided to use a qualitative research methodology in order "to gain an emic perspective on participants' immediate and local meaning for washback" (Davis, 1993). Although the researcher decided to use qualitative strategy only, quantitative data from students' pre-test and post-test were used to help the researcher investigate the effect of washback on the participating students' learning process.

This research was conducted in a language centre in one of the public universities in Indonesia. The participants of this research were 7 final year students, consisting of 3 female and 4 male students. The participating students came from different types of major such as economy, engineering, medicine and sociology. Their English level of proficiency was considered low although they have been introduced to English since junior high. In selecting the participating students, the researcher used random sampling. The reseracher also divided the participants into two groups considering their main purpose in taking TOEFL. For this research, there are two instruments used to collect data; classroom observation and semi-structured interview. After collecting the data, researchers conducted a transcript, displayed the data and made conclusion.

The data collected from both parties provide information on the dimension of washback and factors/variables that affecting it. Walking from that analysis, this research is expected to help all the parties involved in TOEFL preparation class to create a better testing system which can lead to better teaching and learning experience. Although the result is restricted to specific condition, this research is expected to offer some insights especially to teachers on existence of washback in test preparation class so they could think of ways to help students to learn from being tested. As Bailey (2005) said, "teachers may have limited power to influence high-stake national and international examination, but teachers do have tremendous power to lead students to learn, to teach and how to work with test and test result." This study is also intended to welcome and trigger other researchers to investigate the washback phenomena in Indonesia as there are still many areas needed to be explored.

Results and Discussion

In the university where this study was conducted, one of the requirements for graduation is to pass certain TOEFL score. The university started to apply this policy since 2002 as one of the action to motivate students to learn English. They understand that in the future, the ability to use English will be beneficial in every major part of student's life and that was one of the reasons why they compel an English test called TOEFL prediction. The students need to pass the lowest score set by the university that is 425 or above. If student fails to meet the requirement, student needs to retake TOEFL until one pass the test.

The nature of TOEFL preparation course

TOEFL preparation course is conducted due to the fact that there are many students who fail several times to achieve the TOEFL minimum score. The specific purpose of this course is to help students to understand the format of TOEFL and the strategies to answer the questions.

Based on the interview with the participating students, the initial reason on why they take this course was because they wanted to be able to answer the questions on TOEFL eventhough they knew they had very limited understanding on the context. The TOEFL preparation course was conducted for 30 meetings, where students had the chance to study 3 skills such as; Listening, Structure and Written Expression and Reading. Students in this course had to take pre-test and post test, on which the result was used to show the progress each student made during the course. Here is the list of activities on the first meeting of the course:

1. Teacher explaining to students on how to calculate the expected correct questions that students need to do in order to pass certain score on each skill (section).
2. Teacher explaining the expected goal, then starting to explain the format of the test, continued by categorizing each section into topics.
3. Teacher start giving comments on strategies that students can apply to answer the questions as quickly as possible.
4. Teacher giving time to students to analyse the questions and the explanation given by themselves.
5. Teacher asking students to do the exercise from the textbook.
6. Teacher making sure that all students understand the questions and the strategies explained before.
7. Teaching collecting students' answer and giving the answer keys.
8. Teacher and all student then start discussing and analyzing each question and then teacher pointing out where most students make mistake.

As the goal of this course is to help students to pass the expected TOEFL score (425 or above), almost all of the time in the course was used by teachers to introduce the format of TOEFL and well proven strategies to answer the questions.

Dimension of washback on students' depth of learning

This research found that TOEFL did influence students' learning methods and their rate and sequence of learning. From the interview with the teacher, it was found that this TOEFL preparation course was not meant to upgrade student's language competency, but only to give students understanding on the big picture of TOEFL. Students were still expected to have basic English competency and willingness to study outside of this course.

In terms of the depth of learning, the researcher found that the intensity of washback was quite varied depending on students' purpose of taking the TOEFL. In first group where students' goal to take TOEFL as a graduation requirement, they stated that they had to put more effort to study and pass the TOEFL because if they could not pass the test, they should delay their graduation until next year. Almost like putting students' life to the edge, this TOEFL test did influence students' depth of learning. For students who already knew the most difficult part of the test, they even put more effort to study on that part alone.

Student 1: *"If I fail this TOEFL test, I would definitely ruin my timeline and my dream to gradute in 4 years. I need to pass this test so usually I spend one or two hours more outside this class to study the format of the test and also adding some new vocabularies to my memories."*

Student 5: *"Knowing that I need to take TOEFL, I become more diligent than I used to I think. I also try to focus on specific area where I am lacking for example in structure."*

Student 7: *"Maybe because I just want to pass this TOEFL to graduate, I think in almost 4 week I spend really great amount of time to learn English especially the TOEFL prediction. I still need to take TOEFL to get a job. If I don't have high score on my next TOEFL I might end up getting on the low position in the company.*"

On the other hand, in the second group where the reason for taking the test was for the scholarship requirement, this students seemed to be more relaxed. They mentioned that they were not in a hurry and still had time to develop their language skills after this preparation course ended.

Student 2: *"I took this class because I need to understand the format of the test so I would not get panic when I need to take TOEFL. I am here to learn the strategies and to get some experience in taking the real TOEFL test."*

Student 3: *"I feel like this class is helping me to understand what I need to expect when I take TOEFL. But as the schedule of this class is quite packed, I am already quite tired to spend sometime more to study outside of this class."*

Student 4: *"I do feel more motivated when I learn English for testing purpose. I don't know why but it feels like I have certain goal to achieve. And now I need TOEFL score to pass the requirement for scholarship, I think the time I spend more time to study English than before. But I still have sometime to take TOEFL so I can slow down a little bit to study.*"

Comparing these two group, it was clear that the depth of learning were also affected by the purpose on why students take TOEFL test; the importance and time wise. The intensity found on students' learning method is considered strong for students who need TOEFL score as requirement for graduation but the intensity was weak on students who need TOEFL prediction as requirement for scholarship.

Based on the model of washback intensity by Green (2019), this research concluded the dimension of washback effect on the depth of students' learning as follow:
Dimension:

a. The specificity found on students' learning was considered specific.
b. The intensity found on students' learning was considered strong for students who needed TOEFL score as requirement for graduation but the intensity was a lower on students who needed TOEFL as requirement for scholarship.
c. The length of washback effect found on students' learning was considered for short period for students in group 1. But in group 2 the effect could lasted for a longer period.
d. Intentionality: The influence of the test on students' learning was intended

When participant students were asked about their perception on the TOEFL preparation course, they all agreed that they needed this class to help them to understand

the "tips and tricks" in TOEFL. After four weeks attending the course, participants gave comment that the overall class was helping and motivating especially because learning English was intimidating and they need to pass the minimum TOEFL score in a very short time.

Table 1
Minimum TOEFL

Participant	Gender	Purpose Taking TOEFL	Test Taki-ng Experience	Pre-Test Score	Post-Test Score
S 1	Male	Exit test	3	**400**	**450**
S 2	Female	Scholarship	3	**410**	**467**
S 3	Female	Scholarship	2	**370**	**387**
S 4	Female	Scholarship	2	**410**	**463**
S 5	Male	Exit test	3	**400**	**410**
S 6	Male	Exit test	3	**410**	**500**
S 7	Male	Exit test	3	**383**	**433**

CONCLUSION

This research was conducted to investigate the complexity of washback effect on students' learning by focusing on a small scale of the group (consisted of seven students). The data collected from classroom observation was used to answer the nature of TOEFL prediction preparation course and a more detail data was collected through semi-structure interview, letting students to speak their arguments on TOEFL preparation course.

Based on the data collected, it was found that the participants still considered taking TOEFL preparation course to be important. Due to the limited time to study, the intensity of washback effect on each student were varied. Although in some part the dimensions of washback differ on each participants, in some parts such as their perception of the learning method/new strategies introduced in TOEFL preparation course were helpful and bring positive washback to their learning experience especially the depth of their learning. The progress that all the participating student made also showed that the course created more good learning experience than bad. Despite this fact, there are still many aspects that university, teachers or any education practitioners in language testing need to do in order to provide better teaching and learning experience in test-oriented English class.

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