



## EVALUATING FINAL EXAMINATIONS AND THEIR WASHBACK EFFECT IN MOROCCAN TERTIARY EDUCATION: THREE DEPARTMENTS OF ENGLISH STUDIES AS A CASE STUDY

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### Abstract:

The washback effect is one of the main principles of language assessment. The present study investigated the washback effect of university final exams in Morocco on learners' study methods and content. 216 common core university students from Faculties of Letters and Humanities at three Moroccan Universities (Moulay Ismail University, Meknes; Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra; and Hassan II University, Casablanca) were asked to complete the Washback Effect Questionnaire developed by Hemmati and Soltanpour (2014) which consists of 20 five-point Likert scale items. The quantitative data of the questionnaire were descriptively analyzed using the SPSS program. The study results showed that the students' studying methods and content in the departments of English studies in Moroccan Faculties of Letters and Humanities were influenced by final examinations. The exams were important for most learners who participated in the study and significantly influenced their studied content and methods.

**Keywords:** washback effect, final examinations, study methods, study content

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## 1. Introduction

Language testing is unquestionably one of the most crucial aspects of education. It is an important element of the teaching and learning process. Teachers may spend a considerable period teaching, but without adopting effective testing strategies, they may not make sure their instructional objectives are achieved. Many scholars in the field of education stressed the interrelatedness between teaching and testing. Cain (2005), for instance, contends that testing is inseparable from teaching and learning, either in theory or in practice. For a long time, educational practitioners have believed that testing influences learning and teaching practices in various ways (Roghmal, 2018). Different terms have been used to refer to the impact of testing on teaching and learning; some scholars use the term washback, others use backwash, while others prefer the terms impact or effect of the test (Roghmal, 2018). Although scholars use different terms to refer to washback and have different perspectives and explanations of this concept, they all agree on the fact that washback refers to the impact of language testing on teaching and learning (Huges, 1989; Huang, 2019; Cheng, 2000) cited in (Alqahtani, 2021). Some researchers discussed the effect of washback broadly. Cohen (1994), for instance, discussed the effect of washback in terms of how *“assessment instruments affect educational practices and beliefs”* (p. 41) cited in (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). However, other researchers *“investigated the specific areas (such as the content of teaching, teaching methodology, ways of assessing achievement), direction (positive, negative), and extent of the presumed impact”* (Alderson & Wall, 1993).

## 2. Review of the Literature

### 2.1 The Role, Importance, and Purposes of Assessment

Assessment of student learning is undoubtedly one of the most important and complex tasks for teachers. As agents of assessment, teachers are responsible for designing effective assessment tasks supporting students' learning. Assessment practices of this kind allow teachers to design, collect, score, analyze, and interpret evidence about students' learning. From the collected evidence, judgments are made and communicated, and this results in certain outcomes (Harlen, 2007). These assessment results are valuable tools for educational institutions since they assist in evaluating the effectiveness of institutional practices by tracking the functioning of different components of the assessment system and contributing to decision-making about the functioning of departments, programs, and curricula (Ghaicha, 2016). In addition, assessment practices can also allow departments or division heads to evaluate the effectiveness of entire programs and allow faculty to determine what and how well students are learning and how effective are both their institutional and assessment practices to their students (Gaicha, 2016). From practitioners' perspective, good assessment assists teachers in evaluating the effectiveness of their teaching, providing them with a framework to fine-tune teaching methods (Zellif, 2000).

Classroom assessments are not run in void; they are restricted by purposes, uses and functions. In the process of designing assessment tasks, teachers are required to have a clear idea about the purpose of the assessment. Instructors assess for various reasons (Airisian, 1994; Linn & Gronlund, 1995; Pellegrino, Chudowsky & Glasser, 2001). First, assessment provides feedback to students and offers a helping hand to teachers to benefit from the information available to streamline instruction (Nasab, 2015). Richards (2015) contends that assessment in this way *“can help teachers to find out what students are learning, help them to evaluate whether the course materials are effective, encourage the learners and help the teachers to decide if any adjustments need to be made while the course is being delivered”* (p. 677). Similarly, assessment offers many opportunities for students to develop their skills by evaluating their performance (Race *et al.*, 2005). In addition to the formative function of assessment, it can also be used to ascertain what the students know concerning curriculum outcomes. The purpose of assessment in this way is to spot what the students know at a specific point (Nasab, 2015). In brief, the information generated from the assessment can have dual purposes. It can be used for improvement and accountability, which are important in current educational practices.

Phye (1997) summarises assessment purposes in discovering and documenting students' strengths and weaknesses, planning and enhancing instruction, evaluating progress, and making decisions about students. Boud and Falchikov (2007) also assert that for assessment to have a long-term effect, another purpose of assessment is needed: to promote learning outside formal education throughout life. According to them, this learning will necessarily occur within many different contexts. To fulfil this purpose, *“we need to acknowledge the tension that already exists within assessment in higher education and the possibilities for damage to learners that can result from assessment. We also need to move beyond contextual and time-limited functions”* (Boud & Falchikov, 2007, p. 91).

## 2.2 Testing and Teaching

The literature has widely discussed the influence of examination on teaching and learning (Andrews *et al.*, 2002). Although scholars have used different explanations and perspectives to deal with this issue, the common point is that they use the word 'washback' to refer to the influence of tests on teaching and learning. The idea of washback was introduced by different scholars using different terminologies: 'measurement-driven instruction' (Pophan, 1987), 'Systemic validity' (Messick, 1989), 'Curriculum Alignment' (Shepherd, 1990), 'backwash', (Hughes, 1993) (Beikmahdavi, 2016) cited in (Alqahtani, 2021). However, the washback concept adopted in the present research began with Messick's (1989) definition of validity. According to Messick, washback refers to *“the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influence language teachers and learners to do things that they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning”* (Fulcher, 2010, p. 27).

Several frameworks have been described to understand washback mechanisms better. Hughes (1993), for example, discussed these mechanisms in his trichotomy: participant, process, and product. He explains that in order to clarify our thinking on

backwash, it is helpful to distinguish between participants, process, and product in teaching and learning, recognizing that all three may be affected by the nature of a test (Hughes, 1993) cited in (Baily, 1996). Participants in Hughes' trichotomy include students, classroom teachers, administrators, materials developers, and publishers. Under process, Hughes includes any action the participants took that may contribute to the learning process. Finally, product refers to what is learned and the quality of learning (Hughes, 1993).

Alderson and Wall (1993) adopted a different approach to explaining how washback works. They proposed many statements that they referred to as washback hypotheses. The five hypotheses which are directly related to the influence of washback on learners are:

- 1) A test will influence learning,
- 2) A test will influence what learners learn,
- 3) A test will influence how learners learn,
- 4) A test will influence the rate and sequence of learning,
- 5) A test will influence the degree and depth of learning (Baily, 1996, p. 263).

The hypotheses above emphasize that an exam will impact the depth and extent of learning (AL Hinai & AL Jardani, 2020; Cheng, 2000; Beikmahdavi, 2016) cited in (Alqahtani, 2021). This argument is grounded in the significance of identifying the various dependent variables involved in washback to understand their relationship (Alqahtani, 2021).

Baily (1996) suggested a third model that combines Hughes' trichotomy and Wall & Anderson's hypotheses. Baily's model focuses on the interrelationship of the elements involved in washback. Baily separates test takers from instructors and studying from teaching. She also includes the role of researchers in determining the washback effects of exams (Baily, 1996).

### 2.3 Types of Washback

Studies on washback have demonstrated that it can either positively or negatively affect the teaching and learning processes. Generally speaking, harmful or beneficial washback is perceived by the learners (Roghmal, 2018). Tests can motivate students to study more and establish a connection between instruction and standards. However, it can also promote the reverse scenario; the instruction focuses on test preparation at the cost of other activities (Roghmal, 2018). In this regard, Schmitt (2010) claims that the influence of testing on teaching and learning often tends to be presented as harmful. Tests exercise negative influence due to the temptation for teachers to spend time on activities that will help students succeed in the test rather than developing the skills and knowledge that should be the object of instruction (Hamp-Lyons, 1996). On the other hand, "*it is believed that positive washback can be brought about by introducing tests that target the skills needed by language learners in real life*" (Cheng, 1998, p.279). In the same vein, "*positive washback involves test outcomes that present favourable changes in the teaching and learning process*" (Sayfrizal & Pahamzah, 2020, p. 24). From this perspective, good tests can be structured

and applied as efficient teaching-learning tasks and activities to promote a positive teaching-learning process (Beikmahdavi, 2016). Alternatively, negative washback occurs when a test results in undesired changes and hinders students from embracing a deep study approach, hampering curriculum objectives. In this case, teachers may tutor directly for a specific exam. This means that the content of the exams will be narrowly based on the curriculum instead of covering all course objectives (Schmitt, 2010).

### **3. Materials and Methods**

#### **3.1 Research Questions**

The following research questions shaped the present study:

- 1) Do final exams in Moroccan Faculties of Letters and Humanities have any significant washback effect on the students' studying method?
- 2) Do the final exams in Moroccan Faculties of Letters and Humanities have any significant washback effect on the students' studied content?

#### **3.2 Instrument**

To answer the research questions in the present study a questionnaire was the main instrument. The questionnaire was adopted and adapted from the 'Final Examinations and their Washback Effect Questionnaire' developed by Hemmati and Soltanpour (2014). This five-point Likert scale questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part contains questions about demographic information, and the second consists of four main categories. The first category includes six questions about the studied content, and the second includes five questions about students' study methods. These two first categories aimed to elicit information to determine whether the final exams influenced students' study methods and content. The third section of the questionnaire contains six questions and concerns the students' perceived "Importance of final exams." Finally, the last section includes three questions that elicit information about the students' attitudes toward the final exams and their grades. The items on the questionnaire adopted for the present study were designed on a five-point Likert scale, where five = strongly (totally) agree; four = agree; three = neutral; two = disagree; and one = strongly (totally) disagree.

#### **3.3 Participants**

From the 300 questionnaires distributed, 216 common core students filled out and returned the 'Washback Effect Questionnaire.' The students belonged to three Moroccan universities (Moulay Ismail University, Meknes; Ibn Tofail University, Kenitra; and Hassan II University, Ain Chock, Casablanca). All the participants belonged to the Departments of English Studies. They were selected during the fall term exams of the academic year 2022/ 2023 based on their availability and willingness to participate in the study.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

The data gathered from the instrument were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) program, version 26. The table below presents the results related to the washback effect of final examinations on students' studying methods.

**Table 1:** Washback Effect of Final Examinations on Students' Studied Content

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD
1. All sections of courses/ modules are equally important to me.	24.1	41.2	16.2	15.3	3.2	2.32	1.09823
2. While studying my courses, I consider the final exam tests more than pedagogical aims.	23.6	39.8	21.3	12.5	2.8	2.66	1.08762
3. I study the important points without considering the final exams.	15.7	28.2	22.2	27.8	6.0	2.80	1.18211
4. Final exams influence the supplementary materials that I study.	15.3	38.9	34.3	8.8	2.8	2.44	0.92854
5. I prioritise learning the materials in books based on the priority given to them in the final exams.	14.4	40.3	34.3	7.4	3.2	2.58	2.28069
6. I expect my professors to put more emphasis on points tested in final exams.	19	38	27.3	11.1	4.6	2.44	1.06385

The first item in this category was: *All sections of courses/ modules are of equal importance.* Only 3.2% of students strongly disagreed with this item, and 15.3% disagreed, leading to 18.5%. However, 65.3% of students agreed with the item (24.1% strongly agreed and 41.2% agreed). The percentage of students who remained neutral was 16.2%.

The second item in this category was: *While studying my courses, I consider the final exams more than the pedagogical aims.* 46.3% of participants agreed with this item (14.8% strongly agreed and 31.5% agreed), while 21.8% disagreed (16.2% disagreed and 5.6% strongly disagreed). The percentage of students who had no opinion was 31.9%.

The third item was: *I study the important points without considering the final exam.* 33.8% of students agreed with this item (27.8% agreed, and only 6% strongly agreed). Conversely, 43.9% of students disagreed with this item (28.2% disagreed, and 15.7% strongly disagreed). 22.2% of participants preferred to stay neutral.

The fourth item in this category was: *The supplementary materials I study are influenced by final exams.* The percentage of students who agreed with this statement was 54.2% (38.9% agreed and 15.3 strongly agreed). However, only 11.06% disagreed with the

item (8.8% disagreed and 2.8% strongly disagreed). The percentage of students who stayed neutral exceeded the previous items and reached 34.3%.

The fifth item related to the influence of final exams on the studied content was: *I assign priority to learning materials and books based on the priority given to them in the final exams.* 54.7% of students agreed with this item (14.4% agreed and 40.3% strongly agreed). However, the percentage of students who disagreed was very low and did not exceed 10.6% (7.4% disagreed and 3.2% strongly disagreed). Interestingly, the percentage of students with no opinion was as high as the previous item and reached 34.3%.

The last item in this category was: *I expect my professors to put more emphasis on points tested in final exams.* 57% of students agreed with this item (38% agreed and 19% strongly disagreed), while only 15.7% (11.1% disagreed and 4.6 strongly disagreed) disagreed. 27.3% of students stayed without opinion. The next table summarizes the results related to the influence of final examinations on students' studied content.

**Table 2:** Frequency and Percentage of the Influence of Final Exams on Students' Studied Content

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
<b>Valid</b>	Strongly agree	195	18.08	18.08	18.8
	Agree	418	38.68	38.68	57.41
	Neutral	243	22.4	22.4	79.90
	Disagree	174	16.1	16.1	96.00
	Strongly disagree	50	4.00	4.00	100
<b>Total</b>		1080	100,0	100,0	

All in all, as Table 2 indicates, 4% of students totally disagreed, and 16.1% disagreed with the six items included in the category of content-making, leading to a total of 20.1% disagreement. In contrast, 18.08% of students strongly agreed, and 38.68% agreed with the same six items, leading to a total of 56.76% agreement. The percentage of participants who did not comment on the six items was 22.4%.

In addition to the influence of final exams on students' studied content, the next table presents the results of the second category, which investigated the influence of final examinations on students' studying methods.

**Table 3:** Washback Effect of Final Examinations on Students' Studying Method

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	SD
1. Final examinations influence my method of studying.	16.7	50.9	26.9	4.2	1.4	2.22	0.82373
2. I try to study based on previous final exams.	19.0	44.4	18.5	14.8	3.2	2.38	1.05507
3. I spend less time on sections that are less likely to appear in the final exams.	14.8	32.9	29.2	19.4	3.7	2.64	1.06869

4. I study based on final exam questions.	18.1	33.3	28.2	15.3	5.1	2.56	1.10647
5. I have collected a series of final exam questions to consider in my studies.	13.0	40.7	21.3	19.4	5.6	2.63	1.10355

The first item in this category was: *Final examinations influence my studying method*. The total percentage of students who did not agree that final examinations influence their method of studying was only 5.6% (4.2% disagreed and 1.4 strongly disagreed). In contrast, 67.6% of participants agreed with the item (16.7% strongly agreed and 50.9% agreed), and 26.9% had no opinion.

The second item in this category was: *I try to study based on final exams*. Like the first item, the difference between agreement and disagreement percentages was high. At the same time, 63.4% of students agreed with the item (19% strongly agreed and 44.4% agreed), and only 18% of participants disagreed with it (14.8% disagreed and 3.2% strongly disagreed). The percentage of students who had no opinion was 18.5%.

The third item was: *I spend less time on sections that are less likely to appear in the final exams*. 47.7% of students agreed with this item (14.8% strongly agreed and 32.9% agreed), while 24.1% disagreed (19.4% disagreed and 3.7% strongly disagreed). 29.2% of students preferred to stay neutral.

The next item was: *I study based on final exam questions*. The percentages from this item were not different from the previous ones. 51.4% of students agreed with the statement (18.1% strongly agreed and 33.3% agreed), while 20.4% disagreed with it (15.3% disagreed and 5.1% strongly disagreed). 28.2% of them did not express any opinion.

The last item in this category was that I have collected a *series of final exam questions to consider in my studies*. Again, there was a big difference between agreement and disagreement percentages. 53.7% of students agreed with the item (13% strongly agreed and 40.7% agreed), while only 25% disagreed (19.4% disagreed and 5.6% strongly disagreed). 21.3% of participants were neutral.

To have a clearer idea about the influence of final exams on students' studying methods, Table 4 below summarizes the percentages of agreement and disagreement with the five items related to this category.

**Table 4:** Frequency and Percentage of the Influence of Final Exams on Students' Studying Method

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	242	18.68	18.68	18.8
	Agree	489	37.73	37.73	56.53
	Neutral	300	25.86	25.86	82.39
	Disagree	179	13.81	13.81	96.2
	Strongly disagree	49	3.76	3.80	100
	Total	1259	100,0	100,0	



As demonstrated in Table 4, 3.76% of students strongly disagreed, and 13.81% disagreed with the five items, leading to a total disagreement of 17.57%. Conversely, 18.68% of students strongly agreed, and 37.73% agreed with the items, leading to a total agreement of 56.41%. Interestingly, the percentage of students with no opinion reached 25.86%. These results indicate that the students' studying methods in the Faculties of Letters and Humanities in Morocco were highly influenced by final examinations.

The results of the present study showed that the students' studying methods and studied content were influenced by the final examinations in Moroccan Faculties of Letters and Humanities. These findings confirm the results of many other studies (e.g., Andrews, Fullilove & Wong, 2002; Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng & Curtis, 2004; Ferman, 2004; McNamara, 2000; Hemmati & Soltanpoor, 2014), which concluded that washback effect could influence learners.

The majority of the participants in this study asserted that the final examinations influenced their studying methods. Although the participants were asked different questions in different ways, the results remained the same: They studied based on the final exams. This goes in line with Messik's conception of validity, which incorporated both the value that the test endorsed and the impact that the test had on individuals (Fulsher, 2010). As mentioned earlier, according to Messik (1996), "*Washback refers to the extent to which the introduction and the use of a test influence language teachers and learners to do things that they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning*" (p, 241) cited in Fulcher (2010, p. 277). In other words, students study using the previous final exams and focus more on sections that are more likely to appear in final examinations. Accordingly, their study methods would have completely changed if final exams had been designed and processed differently.

The findings of the second domain of the questionnaire show a significant influence of final exams on students' studied content. This aligns with what has been reported in the literature regarding the influence of final examinations on the studied content. For example, Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) conducted a study investigating the influence of the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) on classroom teaching. The researchers concluded that TOEFL affected the content of the course. Similar results were reached by Hemmati and Soltanpour (2014). Their study investigated the washback effect of university-level final examinations on Iranian distance learners' study method and content. The results showed that the final exams significantly influenced the students. The exams influenced both the content and methods of their studying.

According to the results, most students consider all course sections to be equally important. Moreover, if most students consider them so, it is due to the influence of final exams. Based on the researchers' experience as teachers, students are usually told that any point in the course can potentially be an exam question. In other institutions and due to the methods of assessment design, teachers find themselves testing details and marginal points. At Ibn Tofail University, for instance, almost all exams designed for common core students during the academic year 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 were multiple

choice questions (El Kasri, 2025). Because some tests are made up of 30 questions and more, teachers test most of the points in the course sections. This confirms what Alderson and Wall (1993) stated regarding the influence of testing on teaching and learning. According to them, a test causes language teachers and learners to do things “*they would not necessarily otherwise do because of the test*” (p. 117).

Another evidence showing the influence of final exams on studied content is the students’ agreement that they give more priority to final exams which developed a grade-oriented mindset as they tend to value grades more than the quality of learning. Most of them said they expect their teachers to emphasise the points tested in final exams. In addition to that, the supplementary materials that they study are influenced by the final exams. In other words, students stated that they are more interested in final exams than the pedagogical aims of the courses.

## 5. Implications and Recommendations

The results of the present study have some pedagogical implications. First, this study draws Moroccan teachers to the washback effect, which has not been sufficiently investigated in Moroccan tertiary education. In the Moroccan Faculties of Letters and Humanities, there are thousands of students in the departments of English studies who must sit for exams at the end of each semester. The results of this study reveal that these exams are of extreme importance; however, the quality of their design is questionable, and this has implications for test designers. In a study conducted in the Department of English Studies at Moulay Ismail University during the academic year 2019/ 2020, El Kasri *et al.* (2020) confirmed that most of the tests designed for S1 students lack the qualities of assessment principles. Therefore, the exams require far more attention than they have been given. Invalid, unreliable and inauthentic exams can have disastrous consequences for students and the education system.

Many suggestions have been addressed to teachers and test designers to promote beneficial backwash regarding design and content factors. The main recommendations to promote beneficial backwash can be summarised as follows:

### 5.1 Test Design Factors

- 1) Design widely and unpredictably (Hughes, 1989),
- 2) Design tests to be criterion-referenced (Hughes, 1989; Wall, 1996),
- 3) Design the test to measure what the programs intended to teach (Baily, 1996),
- 4) Base the test on sound theoretical principles (Baily, 1989),
- 5) Base achievement tests on objectives (Hughes, 1989),
- 6) Use direct testing (Hughes, 1989; Wall, 1996),
- 7) Foster learner autonomy and self-assessment (1996).

### 5.2 Test Content Factors

- 1) Test the abilities whose development you want to encourage (Hughes, 1989),

- 2) Use more open-ended items (as opposed to selected-response items like m-c) (Heyneman & Ranson, 1990),
- 3) Make examinations reflect the full curriculum, not merely a limited aspect of it (Kellaghan & Greaney, 1992),
- 4) Assess higher-order cognitive skills to ensure they are taught (Heyneman & Ranson, 1990; Kellagan & Greaney, 1992),
- 5) Use a variety of examination formats, including written, oral, aural and practical (Kellagan & Greaney, 1992),
- 6) Do not limit skills to be tested to academic areas (should also relate to out-of-school tasks) (Kellagan & Greaney, 1992),
- 7) Use authentic tasks and texts (Baily, 1996; Wall, 1996) (Brown, 1997).

The recommendations stated above confirm that for tests to have a positive washback effect on students, it is important to adopt effective assessment design methods and strategies. In other words, the tests designed by Moroccan professors in the English Studies Departments should be valid, reliable, authentic, practical, and have a positive washback effect.

## 6. Conclusion

Teaching and testing are strongly interrelated. The relationship between the two concepts can be either positive or negative. The influence of testing on learning can be viewed at different levels. In the present study, the effect of testing on students was detected in students' studying methods and content. Students were negatively affected by the final examination and resorted to studying based on the previous final exams. Luckily, as agents of positive washback, teachers can address the negative effects of testing on teaching and learning as soon as they are detected. These effects can be alleviated if students focus more on the positive consequences of learning. Teachers can also foster a positive impact of testing on teaching if they are more assessment literate. Seminars and workshops need to be organised to empower professors with more assessment skills to design more effective tests for their students.

### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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