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Test format and learning strategies; A washback study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the learning strategies of students for the reading comprehension courses in a semi-distance educational system in Iran called Payam-e-Noor University with over 500,000 students in different branches all over the country. By using qualitative data, i.e. interview, this study intends to examine the viewpoints of students regarding how the reading comprehension tests in Payam-e-Noor University can influence the way they learn. The results indicate that the washback effect works quickly in bringing about changes in learning strategies of students.

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Introduction

Assessment is usually an integral part of every teaching and learning process since tests are mostly conducted to enforce learning and to find out the extent of the learners' achievement. "Tests, in fact, have always supported teaching and learning. Among a variety of factors which can contribute to learning and teaching, tests perhaps are highly influential." (Vahdani, 2007, p. 38)

Testing is a process that can help learners to identify their skills and knowledge and to plan their future learning. Students tend to be influenced by tests due to the direct relationship between learning and testing. In fact, students usually adjust their learning practice and strategies according to the demands of the examinations. The process of adjustment for students can be considered as a way of coping with the assessment system of educational settings. This phenomenon attracted the attention of language testers in 1990s which was then called 'washback' (sometimes also known as 'backwash'). "Washback studies focus on practices or behavior that would not be present if it were not for the test." (Fulcher and Davidson, 2007, p. 337) A test can affect learning strategies of students. Students' learning strategies are important issues to study since they play crucial roles in promoting learning and the students' success. There have been many studies of washback in a variety of educational settings (Khaniya, 1990; Alderson and Wall, 1993; Alderson and Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt and Ferman, 1996; Cheng, 1997; Wall, 2000; Chen, 2002; Green, 2007).

The core issue of this study is the impact of testing on learning. The dominant patterns of assessment system may differ from one country to another, from one institution to another, and even from one educational program to another. By considering Payam-e-Noor University (hereinafter PNU) assessment system, this study will focus on the effect of the PNU reading comprehension tests on learning strategies of PNU students. To my knowledge, few studies have been done to investigate the impact of test in the context of PNU (Vahdani, 2007 and Jafarigozar and Moradi, 2012). "PNU is a semi-

distance system of higher education in Iran which has over a hundred branches and thousands of students inside the country and it is recently extending its frontiers abroad." (Vahdani, 2007, p. 8) PNU is run by a centralized management whose headquarter is in the capital, Tehran, and it has its own system of assessment. The tests that students undertake in PNU may not be designed by their own teachers. In fact, some PNU teachers design a test for a specific course, e.g. reading comprehension, and each of them deliver their own tests to the centralized management in Tehran, and only the centralized management has the authority to choose the tests to be taken. In this research, learning strategies will be investigated in the PNU reading comprehension classes.

2. Washback: definition and background

The desired goal of any teaching activity in language classes, the curriculum developers or syllabus designers, policy makers at any level especially at a very broad and vast environment such as nationwide is to have classes with a high level of learning outcomes. The outcomes would only be gauged by administering tests. Therefore, having applicable and authentic tests would not only be profitable to the students, the teachers or the parents on one level, but also would benefit the administrators or the authorities responsible for the educational communities of countries on another level (Bachman, 1990; Farhady et al., 1994; Fulcher, 2000; Bachman & Palmer, 2010).

One of the desired goals has been prevalent for quite a while in the literature of language testing known as washback or backwash effect where both of them are considered to be equal having no priority upon one another (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Washback effect has been defined as the effect of the test on teaching and learning (Khaniya, 1990; Alderson & Wall, 1993; Fulcher, 2010).

It could be asserted that testers, testees, test developers, principals, authorities all in all look forward to achieving positive effects of the tests or the positive washback. This issue receives attention when any observer notices the importance of tests in the modern life that is the everyday life of people such as students or immigrants all around the world. Therefore, tests are

sometimes the matter of life and death to individuals (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). And in the end, it should be kept in mind that the success or failure of a student could be traced in many sources apart from the test. They could be traced back in the methodology of teaching or the interactions of students with their peers or the interactions of teachers and students, however, these issues are beyond the goals of this study.

3. Strategy: definition and its usage

The two terms *skill* and *strategy* may be confusing, and they are sometimes overlapping. “However a skill is generally accepted to be an acquired ability that operates largely subconsciously, whereas a strategy is a conscious procedure carried out to solve problem in the comprehension process.” (Pang, 2008, p. 6) In other words, these two terms are usually distinguished based on consciousness. “In general terms, strategies are the cognitive steps learners use to process second language input.” (Brantmeier, 2002, p.1)

3.1. Different kinds of strategies

During the process of comprehending a text, learners may use different reading strategies. “This process may involve skimming, scanning, guessing, recognizing cognates and word families, reading for meaning, predicting, activating general knowledge, making inferences, and separating main ideas from supporting ideas.” (Barnett, 1988, p. 151) Learning strategies are generally classified into three major categories: cognitive, meta-cognitive and socio-affective strategies. Cognitive strategies influence the learners’ encoding process. In other words, by using cognitive strategies we understand, we study, we learn, and we solve problems. Meta-cognitive strategies are those skills that we develop about remembering, monitoring and checking our progress. Socio-affective strategies refer to social activities in learning situations which increase learning. Table 1 shows the classification of the strategies along with some examples.

Table1: Types of reading strategies

Types of reading strategies	Some examples
1. Cognitive Strategies	1. Anticipating content 2. Recognizing the structure 3. Integrating information 4. Interpreting the text 5. Rereading
2. Meta-cognitive Strategies	1. Skimming 2. Summarizing 3. Monitoring comprehension 4. Paraphrasing 5. Using general knowledge & experience
3. Socio-affective Strategies	1. Asking friends about the information in the text 2. Asking friends the meaning of words 3. Expressing lack of understanding

There may be some reasons why students are not able to read as efficiently as they should. One reason is that a student may lack the strategies necessary to read even the simplest materials. Some of these students may not learn to use different reading strategies, and others may have difficulties because of using inappropriate reading strategies. The above-mentioned reasons led many researchers to investigate the reading strategies employed by students to help them to handle their difficulties of reading (Fotovatian & Shokrpour, 2007; Vianty, 2007; Fazilatfar, 2010; Fuenzalida, 2010; Oranpattanachai, 2010; Karbalaeei, 2010; Shafei Ebrahimi, 2012). However, in this study the students’ learning strategies is assessed to investigate any potential effect of the PNU test on them.

4. This study

4.1. Participants

Participants of the study consisted of students, and it’s essential to mention that voluntary participation, rather than compulsory, was employed in this study. Moreover, to promote the participants’ responses, the researcher assured the participants that their identities would remain confidential in this research. Forty students majoring in English Translation and studying at the different branches of PNU participated in the interview section. These students were studying reading comprehension at the first and second years of BA.

4.2. Material

A semi-structured interview (Appendix A) measured the students’ learning strategies for reading comprehension. However, the instruments had to be reliable and valid to obtain accurate results. Thus, the items of the interview, which were written according to the researcher’s studies and experience, were examined to determine its reliability and validity in the pilot study. The participants of the pilot study consisted of five BA PNU students. All of them were English major students studying at a branch of PNU. The second groups of participants consisted of two PNU teachers (one female and one male) who teach reading comprehension course. After the both pilot studies, the researcher found the interview items appropriate for the study. The interview items were prepared in English; however, in order to ensure the absolute comprehension by all the students, the interviews were done in Farsi (i.e. the students’ mother tongue).

5. The results of the study and discussion

For reading a text from the textbook, among the 40 students, almost 35 of them first skim the text. And during skimming, they underline the new vocabularies. Almost 30 of them mentioned that without trying to guess the new vocabularies, they look them up in a bilingual dictionary (i.e. English to Farsi) to understand the meanings. And then they reread the text; in case the new vocabularies are not available at the word list of the textbook, they look them up in a monolingual dictionary (i.e. English to English) in order to make themselves ready for the class participation. In the following graph, the dark grey column shows the average of the students’ usage of bilingual dictionary, the light grey column shows the average of the students’ usage of monolingual dictionary and the medium grey column shows the students’ tendency to guess the vocabularies by using the context while reading a text in their reading comprehension textbook.

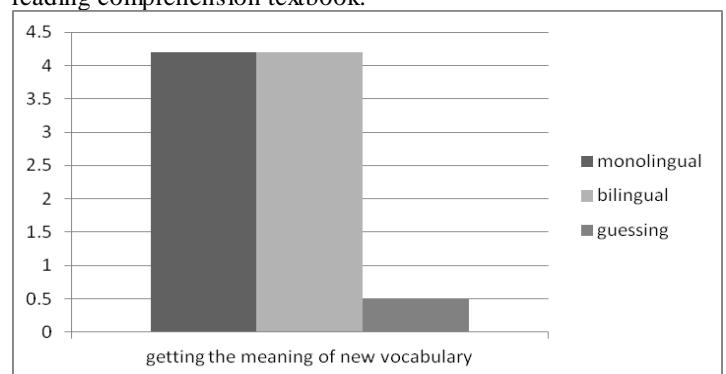


Figure1 How students get the meaning of new vocabularies

According to this graph, participants mostly ignore the important role of guessing the words from the context which is a necessary skill for reading a text in a foreign language. Moreover, many of them prefer to look up the new vocabularies

in a monolingual dictionary and then look them up in a bilingual dictionary; in this way, the skill of looking up words in English to English dictionary is ignored as well. According to the oral interview, students declared that they don't need to learn such skills since the vocabulary items of the PNU reading comprehension test are mostly taken from the word list of their textbook. This list, which includes the English to English definition of the vocabularies, is available at the end of the textbook. And almost all of the students admitted that they only rely on this list for their final exam.

Among the 40 students, many of them admitted that there are different situations that make them memorize the exercises from their textbooks. 91 % of the participants declared that they memorize the exercises when they don't understand them, when the exercises are difficult and complicated or when they don't have enough time to understand the exercises (specially the night before the final exam since they don't have enough time to understand the exercises). Only 9% of the participants mentioned that they never memorize the exercises. The irony is that all of the students believed that learning is not equal to memorizing; however, they keep on doing it since their final exam usually includes the exact exercises of their textbook. The following table shows the exact average of the situations when students memorize the exercises.

Table 2: The situations that students memorize the exercises

No	Item	Average
1	I memorize the exercises when I don't understand them.	70 %
2	I memorize the exercises when they are difficult and complicated.	80%
3	I memorize the exercises when I don't have enough time to understand them.	90%

As can be seen in the table, most of the students admitted that they memorize the exercises for the above-mentioned reasons. The obvious point to make is that the structure of the PNU reading comprehension test leads students to ignore the important role of learning, therefore, they often memorize the exercises which is the 'easiest solution' to them. Memory-oriented strategy can be considered as a type of cognitive strategy; however, most of the students tend to overuse this strategy with wrong intentions.

The sample tests of the PNU reading comprehension tests are available, and teachers usually inform students to get some sample tests. All of the students declared that they get some sample tests, and they are the main basis of their studies for the final exam. Even some students mentioned that they get as many as sample test that are available. Some other students admitted that they memorize some items of the sample tests that are difficult to understand by the help of the answer key of the sample tests.

Table 3: The students' responses toward the sample tests

No	Item	Average
1	I use the sample tests as the main basis of my studies.	100%
2	I provide some sample tests.	70%
3	I provide the sample tests as many as available.	30%
4	By using the answer key, I memorize some items because I don't understand them or I don't have enough time to understand them.	80%

Students believe that it is logical to use the sample tests as the main basis of their studies since their final exam not only follow the same features and structures but also may include one or more similar items available in the sample tests. Most of the students admitted that they only provide some sample tests,

however, some of them insisted on getting the sample tests as many as possible because they believe that in this way it is more probable to get good scores. Most of the participants declared that they use the answer key to memorize one or more items since they don't understand them or they don't have adequate time to understand them. The availability of the sample tests has the advantage of making the students familiar with the structure of the final exam; however, the assessment system of PNU leads students to misuse the sample tests and to ignore the useful sub skills of reading comprehension.

The social reading strategies are almost ignored among the students, and the teachers hardly lead the students to use such important strategies. The teachers usually ask the students to be prepared for the reading for the next session, therefore, the definitions of the vocabularies, the comprehension of the text and the answers of the exercises are checked in the classrooms. The list of vocabularies, which is available at the end of the textbook, is the main source of the vocabulary definitions for both teachers and students since according to the teachers, "that's what students need for their final exam." Moreover, teachers complained that they don't have enough time to spend on social reading strategies. In this case, there's no room for improving the skill of peer cooperation before or during class time. The following table is a mean average of the students' responses regarding other types of strategies.

Table 4: The students' responses regarding the learning strategies

No	Item	Average
1	When I finish reading a text (or a part of it), I try to summarize it.	20%
2	When I finish reading a text (or a part of it), I try to paraphrase it.	30%
3	During reading a text or after finishing it, I try to guess the unknown words from the context.	10%
4	When I finish reading a text (or a part of it), I try to take note.	40%
5	During reading a text or after finishing it, I look up the unknown words in a dictionary (bilingual, monolingual or the word list of the textbook).	100%
6	When I look up the unknown words in a dictionary, I try to write down the meaning of them.	90%

According to the table, the students hardly tend to use some strategies as summarizing, paraphrasing, note-taking, guessing the unknown words from the context and the like, and they are usually more interested in employing reference materials like a dictionary to find the meaning of new words during reading which causes interference in comprehension. In the oral interview, a participant declared:

"We mostly use the strategies & skills that are needed for the classroom activities and our final exam. Why should we work on the skills as 'guessing words from the context' when it is not required in our final exam?"

In this study, the students tried to prepare themselves according to the activities that are required in their classroom and their final exam not according to the approved reading comprehension strategies. In fact, a good test should be able to lead students to employ various suitable strategies.

6. Conclusion

Taken into consideration all the findings of the present study, it can be concluded that the PNU reading comprehension tests have influence over how students learn. The responses of the participants revealed that they tried to varying extents to employ the learning strategies, e.g. memorizing some exercises,

ignoring the importance of guessing the words, focusing on the sample tests, which are useful for their final exam. This study may help to understand what is actually happening inside a classroom in PNU, and it clearly showed that the PNU reading comprehension test affects how students learn. It is apparent that such system of education needs some changes to improve learning process. A potential suggestion can be the modification of the format of the test so that it can evaluate different sub skills of reading comprehension such as guessing the vocabulary from the context. In this case, it will be more likely to increase the quality of education.

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Appendix A

The students' interview questions

1. Do you take the PNU reading comprehension tests of the previous semesters? Why? How many?
2. Are you familiar with the items of your final exam?
3. Do such sample tests form the basis of your studies for your final exam?
4. What is the basis for your midterm exam?
5. How do you prepare yourself for your reading class at university? Do you usually use bilingual or monolingual dictionaries? How about guessing the new vocabularies?
6. How do you study for the final exam? What are your learning strategies? Do you memorize exercises? Why?
7. Give yes/no answer to the following statement and provide explanation if necessary:
 - a. When I finish reading a text (or a part of it), I try to summarize it.
 - b. When I finish reading a text (or a part of it), I try to paraphrase it.
 - c. During reading a text or after finishing it, I try to guess the unknown words from the context.
 - d. When I finish reading a text (or a part of it), I try to take note.
 - e. During reading a text or after finishing it, I look up the unknown words in a dictionary (bilingual, monolingual or the word list of the textbook).
 - f. When I look up the unknown words in a dictionary, I try to write down the meaning of them
8. Give yes/no answer to the following statement and provide explanation if necessary:
 - a. I use the sample tests as the main basis of my studies.

b. I provide some sample tests.

c. I provide the sample tests as many as available.

d. By using the answer key, I memorize some items because I don't understand them or I don't have enough time to understand them.