

# A Brief Review of Washback Studies in the South Asian Countries

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**How to cite this paper:** Sultana, N. (2018). A Brief Review of Washback Studies in the South Asian Countries. *The Educational Review, USA*, 2(9), 468-474.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.26855/er.2018.09.002>

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## Abstract

Influence of tests on teaching and learning, which is known as washback, has garnered attention among the researchers and scholars because of the ever-growing testing industry worldwide. Scores of the high stakes language tests are increasingly used as the gatekeeper to higher education, better employment or immigration to a different country. Acknowledging the importance of studying the influence of test, several washback studies have been conducted in the past 20 years targeting various aspects of how tests influence teaching and learning. However, washback research lacks critical input from the extreme test-oriented South Asian countries (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), where tests have an immense influence on all levels of stakeholders. Therefore, this paper systematically reviews the limited studies conducted in this region to explore the nature of washback in its local contexts as well as to reveal the research gaps for future washback researchers.

## Keywords

Washback, South Asian Countries, Test Impact

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## 1. Introduction

There is a rising concern among the academics and researchers because of the increasing influence of the tests or examinations on the stakeholders, the society, and the educational policy. This influence of tests particularly on teaching and learning is known as washback (Alderson & Wall, 1993). The term washback is generally used in language education to indicate the impact of high-stakes and external language tests on the teachers' teaching and students' learning. Research on washback is marked by Alderson and Wall's (1993) pioneer work proposing 15 hypotheses indicating the influence of tests on teachers, students; the influence of tests on the contents, methods, degree, depth, and teaching and learning attitude; important examinations have washback, and unimportant examinations do not have washback. This impact study conducted in Sri Lanka later guided a range of dominant washback studies (Bailey, 1996; Cheng, 2005, Green, 2007; Hughes, 1993; Shih, 2007) in the coming years.

However, compare to the washback studies conducted in the other parts of the world, there is a scarcity of washback research in the South Asian countries- Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The comprehensive table by Cheng, Sun and Ma (2015, p. 442) listing the major washback studies by countries, the Sri Lankan impact study by Alderson and Wall in 1993 is the only large-scale work that was conducted in the South Asian zone. Moreover, there is no comprehensive review of washback literature based on studies conducted in the South Asian countries. This concise review is expected to contribute the washback literature in general. Therefore, this paper systematically reviews the available

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washback studies in the South Asian countries to explore the nature of washback in the local contexts.

### **1.1. Defining the Key Term: Washback**

One of the earliest explanatory definitions of washback was offered by Pearson (1988), who stated that the way examinations influence the attitudes, behaviors, and motivation of teachers, learners, and parents is known as washback. Hughes gave the most straightforward but most dominant definition (1989), "the effect of testing on teaching and learning is known as backwash" (p. 1), which was strongly supported by Bailey (1996). Referring to washback, Shohamy (1992) wrote that washback is the outcome of the powerful authority of external tests, which influences the test takers' lives. Going one step further, Alderson and Wall (1993) stated that washback compels teachers and students to do things they would not necessarily otherwise do in the absence of a test. Thus, washback is the connection between testing and learning (Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, & Ferman 1996). Later, Messick (1996) described washback as the extent to which tests influence teachers to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning. The root of washback thus lies in the fact that tests have effects on teaching and learning. Thus, washback is a natural outcome of any high-stakes test, intended or unintended, when the future of the test-takers is influenced by the outcomes (Cheng, 2005; Beikmahdavi, 2016). From the review of the definitions of washback, we can generalize that washback is the influence of high-stakes tests on classroom instruction, both on teaching and learning.

## **2. Search Method**

The criteria of my search method were built on few factors. First, since I wanted to review only the studies conducted in the South Asian countries, my search was limited to the countries listed as South Asian. Second, only empirical studies were included in the search. Third, since washback studies officially are marked by Alderson and Wall's 1993 publication, my search was limited from 1993 to 2018. My search contained three types of data sources: journal articles, doctoral dissertations, books or book chapters. I used key phrases such as, as 'backwash,' 'washback,' 'impact of test or test impact,' 'consequences,' 'effects or influences of tests' to search for studies on washback, however, studies conducted only in the South Asian context were kept.

## **3. Washback in South Asian Countries**

Washback studies conducted in the context of other countries may not be able to comprehend the embedded complexity and uniqueness of the washback effect in the South Asian countries. The few empirical studies conducted in the South Asian region are discussed country wise to comprehend the common themes. The only widely published impact study in the South Asian zone conducted in Sri Lanka is not discussed here since it has already been discussed in the introduction.

### **3.1. Bangladesh**

The five studies (including the doctoral dissertation) found in the context of Bangladesh covering all major three education levels of the country, revealed an existing misalignment among curriculum, teaching, and testing causing a negative washback effect in classroom teaching and learning. One such study about the washback of Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) exam on teaching and learning, researched by Hoque (2016) disclosed teachers' high reliance on commercially produced guidebooks, test papers, suggestion books in teaching the students. The study further found out that teachers did not distinguish between teaching to the test and teaching to the syllabus. Most of them did not realize the importance of knowledge about the curriculum. Thus, there is a mismatch between the objectives of the curriculum and classroom teaching. Focusing on the mismatch between the objectives of the stated curriculum, classroom teaching and the test, the

only doctoral dissertation available in the context of Bangladesh at the higher secondary level, conducted by Hoque (2011) revealed that HSC examinations had a strong negative washback on the classroom teaching, syllabus, and curriculum, teaching content, methodology, and learning. The test triggered a direct change in the classroom teaching contents but was unable to change teacher's attitude and behavior towards teaching methodology. The curriculum content was narrowed to the test related pieces increasing teacher-centered pedagogy. The results further found out that most of the teachers and students even were not aware of the curriculum objectives. All items in the syllabus and textbooks were not tested, and thus they remained ignored since the publication of the book in 2001. The study demonstrated a heavy reliance on test preparation materials, such as, test papers, past questions, and model questions, which confirmed the previous study of Maniruzzaman and Hoque (2010) that test narrowed down the curriculum and a substantial mismatch between teaching objectives and curriculum objectives. However, Hoque (2011) pointed out that, sociocultural factors play a vital role in this part of the world in determining the teaching, where teachers have to cope up with large classes, lack of freedom to choose the textbooks, obligations to follow institutional policies to teach, and a centralized, knowledge-based examination-oriented culture. This large-scale research at the HSC level pointed out what washback looked like in this context but did not dig out the reasons behind this negative washback effect and how washback functioned in a unique context such as in Bangladesh.

The findings mentioned above of the test-oriented culture are resonated in the studies related to the learning of the students too. Maniruzzaman's (2016) recent washback study on the washback of EFL assessment on the undergraduate students found out that learners spent more time preparing for the test to score high instead of learning the language itself. They did not consider attaining communicative competence was important and spent more time in practices items, which were likely to be tested. The author concluded that in this context "washback functioned as an obstacle to EFL education" (p. 363) and suggested to design communicative tests promoting language learning. This study is particularly important to realize that students' learning is always closely tied to the test itself. Likewise, Maniruzzaman and Hoque's (2010) research on the HSC students and Maniruzzaman's (2012) research on Secondary School Certificate (SSC) students, also confirmed the test preparation mindset of the teachers as they did not cover the whole syllabus of the test due to the exam pressure. These studies illustrated that learners and teachers in all levels of education in Bangladesh prepare only for the test, which by default create the unintended washback effect to the teaching and learning.

### **3.2. Bhutan**

Kirkpatrick and Gyem's (2012) study in Bhutan examined the washback effect of the changed English testing at the SSC level on teaching and learning. The results demonstrated teachers' positive attitude in accepting the new curriculum. In implementing this new curriculum, the teachers and students considered assessment as "a fundamental part of the entire teaching and learning process" (Kirkpatrick & Gyem, 2012, p. 13) indicating the test-driven mindset. However, negative washback stemmed out because of the vagueness in methodological approaches, time constraint to cover the heavy syllabus, lack of training to implement the new system, lack of curriculum syllabus and lack of assessment literacy among the teachers. This study shows not the test itself, rather other interconnecting factors in the system work as the deciding factors in engineering the washback.

### **3.3. India**

Only one available washback study in India illustrated how the mismatch between assessment scheme of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) exam and classroom teaching made the test a de facto curriculum, investigated by Mathew (2012). She further noted that the vision of the curriculum and test developers was unable to cater to students from all social and economic background. Mathew concluded, "the gap between curriculum-as-intention and curriculum-as-reality can be

closed only through a research and development approach to one's teaching, and that long-term improvement of education hinges on the effective utilization of curriculum research" (p. 199). Mathew's study based on document analysis does not reveal the nature and function of washback in the context except reporting the existence of a negative washback on teaching.

### 3.4. Pakistan

Studies conducted in Pakistan shows how the test-driven nature of the country creates a 'teaching towards the test' situation. Of the two studies conducted on the washback of SSC examination in Pakistan, in one such study, A. H. Soomro and Memon (2016) found out that due to the extreme pressure of the test, teachers followed the objectives of the examination while selecting the teaching methods, contents, and materials. Moreover, the allocated time for the class was too short to practice the expected objectives of the textbook. The teachers agreed that they would not do the same if the examination were not creating extra pressure on them. The other study conducted by Khitab, Ghaffar, Zaman, and Ali (2016) in the same context explored how teachers ignored the prescribed curriculum and syllabus to follow the test objectives because they wanted the students to score high. Both studies illustrated the negative washback of tests due to the mismatches between the curriculum objectives and test objectives.

In the same line of findings, Ahmad, Ghani, Alam, and Sadiq (2012) and later Adnan and Mahmood (2014) studied the washback of HSC examination on English language teachers and noted that if the exam were not there, they would have used communicative methodologies instead of Grammar Translation Methods (GTM). The teachers prepared their teaching contents matching the test objectives so that students could score high because of the high-stakes nature of the test. The authors further noticed that teaching the test techniques grew intense as the test drew near. Ahmad et al.'s (2012) research explored how the pattern of the HSC exam in Pakistan led the teachers to prepare the students for the test. Teachers are found to teach those chapters, which were essential for scoring high in the test. They advised the students to revise previous exam papers as the "same questions are repeated after every few years which makes the task easy but effect the learning badly" (p. 187). In exploring the washback effect of HSC on teachers and students, Aftab, Qureshi, and William (2014), additionally found out that the examination did not allow the communicative language teaching since it did not test listening and speaking skills. Moreover, its multiple choice-based question pattern and negligence towards assessing critical thinking abilities encouraged poor teaching practices linking classroom activities directly to the questions of the examination. Further, researchers (Ahmad et al., 2012; Adnan & Mahmood, 2014; M. N. Soomro & Memon, 2016; Khitab et al., 2016; A. H. Soomro & Shah, 2016) found out that teachers did not practice listening and speaking in the class, because these skills were not tested in the SSC and HSC examinations in Pakistan; the teaching time was used to practice reading and writing skills following the objectives of the test. These studies showed a prevailing test preparation culture in the classroom, which is responsible for creating harmful and negative washback to classroom teaching.

Few washback studies in Pakistan revealed a lack of assessment awareness in the teachers, researchers, and students. Teaching towards the test, which is generally regarded as an adverse outcome of high-stakes tests, was considered as a desired washback effect in one of the contemporary washback studies by M. N. Soomro, and Memon (2016). On finding that few teachers did not use past question papers in classroom teaching, the authors labeled the incident as "negatively positive washback" as the examinations did not work as the "teaching devices" (p. 194). The arguments demonstrated the exam-oriented mindset in even the researchers of the region. Mumtaz's (as cited in Mathew, 2012, p. 1663) study on the SSC exam in Pakistan found out that, although the test was flawed and only was preparing the students for the exam, both teachers and students rated the language course good enough to meet their future needs. Aftab et al. (2014) noticed how many students in Pakistan did not realize the actual reason for studying English as a subject in the schools; for them, it was one of the papers, which they needed to pass or score well to get the access to higher education or better job. These studies make us aware of the complicated situation in the

country where negative washback is a common outcome of testing because of the misaligned nature of the educational system.

### 3.4. Nepal

Probably the earliest doctoral study on washback was investigated by Khaniya in 1990 examining the washback effect of the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) English exam in Nepal on teaching. In case of Khaniya’s study, the design of the exam exerted negative washback effect directing the teachers to teach towards the objectives of the test, instead of the objectives of the planned curriculum. Listening and speaking were not taught since neither they were tested, nor the course materials encouraged the teachers to practice these communicative skills. The textbooks contained unrealistic grammar-based situations, which did not suit the need for communicative purposes in real life. Teachers spent most of their time practicing the contents, which they thought was important. The author, then, concluded the teaching for the final test was inevitable considering the effects of the test on the future of the students, however, whether the teaching towards the test is educationally beneficial or not depends on the design of the test. This study is significant to realize how introducing a new communicative based test is not enough to bring changes in the system; the test and the system both should be ready to accept and implement those changes.

## 4. Key Themes

The following comprehensive Table 1 categorizes the various washback aspects those have been researched in the South Asian countries.

**Table 1.** The areas of washback studied in empirical works found in the South Asian countries.

Aspects of teaching and learning	Specific areas of teaching and learning
Teachers and Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Teaching methodology,</li> <li>-Textbook and materials,</li> <li>-Teaching activities,</li> <li>- Perception and knowledge about the curriculum and syllabus,</li> <li>- Perception about the test,</li> <li>- Exam pressure on the teachers,</li> <li>- Time constraint,</li> <li>- Lack of assessment literacy,</li> <li>- Test preparation</li> </ul>
Misalignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Mismatch between the objectives of the curriculum and test,</li> <li>- Mismatch between the objectives of the stated curriculum and teaching syllabus</li> </ul>
Learners and learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Attitudes and perception about the towards the test,</li> <li>- Awareness about the objectives of the syllabus,</li> <li>- Test preparation,</li> <li>- Learning activities and materials,</li> <li>- Motivation towards good scores, not actual language learning</li> </ul>
Test design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How real communications are missing from the test,</li> <li>- Influence of test objectives,</li> <li>- Missing link between test items and the purpose of the course/test</li> </ul>

Table 1 explores that most of the washback studies in the South Asian countries were conducted on washback of the examination on teaching and teachers. Almost all of them reveals that there is negative test washback on teaching because of the existing misalignment between the curriculum and the examination, which by default lead towards the teaching to the test culture in the classroom. In all these countries, a Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) based curriculum has been introduced to induce positive washback on teaching and learning. However, the tests in most of these countries still fail to endorse the basic principles of CLT. Consequently, there exists an unintended washback of testing on teaching and learning. Teachers teach towards the test and students study only to score high in the examination. Further, there are some unique variables noticed in the findings of the studies conducted in South Asian countries. For example, little allocated time to cover the vast syllabus and lack of assessment literacy worked as the barriers to the expected washback effects in classroom teaching and learning. Their lack of knowledge about the test design triggers the teaching towards the testing phenomenon causing unintended washback effects. Table 1 shows that there is almost no washback research linking washback effect to the design of the test. Contrarily,

the design of the test is closely associated with effective teaching and learning. This aspect has never been investigated in the mentioned washback studies. Few studies investigating learners and learning revealed too little to understand the nature of washback effect on them. In general, it seems that students are keener in getting a high score and thus end up cramming the content of the test in the name of test preparation.

## 5. Conclusion

The review shows the dearth of washback research in the South Asian regions. Even though most of the countries in this region are known for their extreme test-oriented culture, no large-scale washback research has been conducted after the Sri Lankan impact study in 1993. For example, India, the largest country in the South Asia and probably a prototype of China concerning test culture, does not have any widely published studies on washback. This shows the lack of test awareness in the researchers as well as in the mass people. Except for the Sri Lankan impact study (Alderson & Wall, 1993), none of the other articles from South Asian countries are published in any top-rated journals and are thus rarely cited in any other international washback studies. Moreover, the mentioned studies lack methodological richness too. Thus, washback research lacks input from this part of the world due to lack of extensive research and publication. As washback researchers, we need to investigate the phenomenon extensively to be able to understand the complexity of washback in the local settings investigating washback on learning, the relationship of washback and curriculum alignment, washback of test preparation, and washback of classroom assessment.

I would like to acknowledge that I may not have included some articles because of their online unavailability or lack of empirical input.

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