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**Iranian Pre-university Students' Perceptions towards
the English Section of the Iranian National University
Entrance Exam (INUEE): A Washback Study***

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Abstract

Examining the effect of high-stakes tests on learners' perceptions has been one of the strands of washback-related research. The present study purported to investigate the washback effect of the English section of the Iranian National University Entrance Exam (henceforth INUEE) on the pre-university students' perceptions about the high-stakes test. The participants of the study were 218 female students at two pre-university schools in the city of Ahwaz, Iran. The data were collected through a validated questionnaire. Responses and reactions to the questions were found to be mixed: a sizeable segment of the students were positive about the INUEE, considering it a valid evaluator of academic knowledge and viewing the test as a factor which at least 'forced' them to study English. However, those with negative perceptions criticized the test for mainly being an evaluator of rote-memorization ability (rather than academic knowledge) and a major source of anxiety, and its multiple-choice testing format etc. The findings could be of pedagogic help and significance to policy makers, language testing scholars and teachers.

Key Words: washback, Iranian National University Entrance Exam, perceptions, students

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Background of the Study

The concept of washback has been explored and defined from various vantage points. Washback (Alderson & Wall, 1993) or backwash (Biggs, 1995, 1996) generally refers to the influence of testing on teaching and learning. Washback effect of a test could be either negative or positive. Alderson and Wall (1993) defined negative washback as the undesirable influence of a test on teaching and learning. Shohamy, Donista-Schmidt, and Ferman (1996) pointed out that negative washback occurs when teachers experience a high level of anxiety, fear, and pressure to cover the material, because they feel that their job performance is assessed by students' test scores. However, positive washback generally refers to the beneficial influence of tests and examinations on teaching and learning. In positive washback students are usually encouraged and motivated to work harder, teachers and learners fulfill their teaching and learning goals and teachers pay more attention to students' interests and needs (Alderson & Wall, 1993).

Reviewing the literature reveals that the washback effect of high-stakes tests has been approached and investigated from various perspectives in different contexts and countries. One of the strands of washback-related research has been the investigation of the effect of the high-stakes tests on learners' perceptions. According to Hughes (1993) and Bailey (1996), teachers and learners are the most frequently investigated participants in washback studies; they argue that as these participants' perceptions could directly influence their action (i.e., teaching or learning), understanding how they perceive the test is very crucial in washback studies. Bailey (1996) further contends that students' perceptions and views towards the high-stakes tests should not be taken for granted as "learners are the key participants whose lives are most directly influenced by language testing washback" (Bailey, 1999, p. 14). In the pertinent literature a larger number of studies (e.g., Cheng, 2004; Lumley & Stoneman, 2000; Mahmoudi, 2013; Ozmen, 2011) have addressed themselves with the investigation of the teachers' perceptions towards the high-stakes tests whereas a smaller number of studies have sought to examine the learners' perceptions about the tests (e.g., Li, 1990; Weili, 2010; Zhao, 2006). For instance, Cheng (2004) who used a questionnaire to find out teachers' attitudes toward the modified Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE)

reported that the teachers' reaction to the modified test was positive and their initial tensions and worries decreased. Teachers in Ozmen's study (2011) believed that the "Selection Examination for Professional Posts in Public Organizations" (SEPPPO) in Turkey exerted negative washback effects on the both students and teachers. In Iran, Mahmoudi's (2013) study, which investigated the perceptions of pre-university teachers towards the Iranian National University Entrance Exam, revealed that teachers' perceptions towards the test were mixed (i.e., both negative and positive). Given the objective of the present study which is to investigate the washback effect of the INUEE on the pre-university students' perceptions about the English section of the high-stakes test, a brief review of the studies dealing with learners' perceptions towards the high-stakes tests is provided below.

In China, Zhao (2006) investigated the attitudes of Chinese university students toward the College English Test (CET) and the relationship between their attitudes and their test performance. The findings indicated that students were motivated to do well on the CET-4 despite being uncertain about their ability to perform well on the test. In USA, Reynolds (2010) analyzed the washback effect of the TOEFL test on the learners' perceptions. The results of the study showed that the meanings of washback for students can be investigated in terms of whether or not the TOEFL preparation process is useful for students and can meet their needs. The descriptive interpretations revealed that the more confident students were regarding English and TOEFL, the more negative washback they perceived for their English language learning. They believed that some factors such as students' attitudes and motivation, authentic contexts and materials for English practice along with teacher's pedagogy had constructed the washback effect of TOEFL on learning. In China, Weili (2010) looked into the washback effect of the listening comprehension subtest of New College English Test (CET 4) on language learners. The study found that students held both positive and negative perceptions about the test. For instance, while the students were found to be positive about the objective aspects of the listening subtest, they were subjectively unsatisfied by the subtest's difficulty, its time allotment, and its score report.

In the educational context of Iran, a number of studies have been conducted to find out the participants' perceptions towards the washback effect of the INUEE. For instance, Razmjoo (2004) investigated teachers' and learners' perceptions regarding the impact of the INUEE on teachers' teaching. Ghorbani (2008) investigated the nature and scope of the INUEE on pre-university English teachers' curricular planning based upon teachers' perceptions. Salehi and Salehi (2011) investigated the teachers' perceptions towards the washback effect of the INUEE on using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in English classrooms in the city of Isfahan. Salehi and Yunus (2012) investigated the high school English teachers' perceptions about the INUEE in the city of Isfahan. A questionnaire was administered for data collection. The findings of their study revealed that the teachers' perceptions were negatively influenced by the test. Overall, by comparing and contrasting the washback studies conducted in the context of Iran, it could be deduced that the learners' perceptions about the effect of the INUEE on their English learning as well as the influence of factors other than the washback effect of the INUEE on their English learning has yet to be investigated. The present study aims to be a step in this direction: to investigate the washback effect of the INUEE on the pre-university students' perceptions about the high-stakes test. The study, in fact, seeks to find the answer to the following research question: *How does the INUEE affect students' perceptions towards English language learning?*

Methodology

Participants and instrumentation

The participants of the study were 218 pre-university female students whose ages ranged from 17 to 19. The study was carried out in six classes of two pre-university schools in the city of Ahwaz, Iran.

The questionnaire used in Hwang's (2003) study was adopted to be used as it was considered the most comprehensive and relevant instrument available for the purpose of the present study. The questionnaire consisted of the following sections: 1. Personal information; 2. Awareness of the INUEE; 3. Attitude towards the INUEE; 4. Attitude towards the textbook, and 5. Their English learning. Besides the open-ended questions, ranking type questions, yes/no

questions, and Likert scale questions, some blank spaces were also designated in the questionnaires for the respondents' possible further comments and explanations.

The instrument's validity and reliability was taken into consideration. To ensure the validity, a panel of experts (two university lecturers and three PhD candidates in TESL) evaluated and found the content of questionnaire appropriate in terms of addressing the objective of the study adequately; however, they all envisaged that the students would encounter problems with understanding and responding to the questions of the questionnaire in English. Therefore, the English version was translated into Persian. In order to preserve the validity of the original questionnaire, the back-translation procedure (from Persian into English) was done by two PhD students of TESL. The translated version of the questionnaire was administered to a class with 34 pre-university students as a pilot study. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the internal consistency reliability of each subscale of the questionnaire. Based on George and Mallery's (2003, p. 231) categorization, Cronbach's alpha reliability was found to be either "good" or "acceptable".

Data Collection and Analysis

Ethical imperatives were taken into consideration for conducting the study. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of their identities and the information provided by them. They were also informed that their participation was voluntary and they could stop it at any time without any problem. Having the consent of the participants, the researcher explained the purpose of the study in detail and described the merits of carrying out this research to the students. The questionnaire was subsequently administered to 218 students.

As for the analysis of the data collected through the questionnaires, the students' responses were examined through the application of frequency counts, and were presented in percentages. In order to identify a total student response, a total answer for each question across the questionnaire was calculated. Quantification was restricted to describing the frequency and percentage of the responses (descriptive statistics). As for the analysis of qualitative data (i.e., respondents' further comments and explanations), the responses were subjected to

content analysis through which common themes were identified and categorized.

Findings of the Study

In this section, we report and describe the students' responses to the questions of the questionnaire along with some sample notes provided by some of the respondents in their questionnaires.

Students' Perceptions about the INUEE

As part of their personal information, the students were asked whether they had had any tutoring or test coaching in preparation for the INUEE. The elicited responses regarding coaching are presented in Table 1 below. Based on their responses, the students could be categorized into three groups: 1. the first group who had never had any tutors; 2. the second group who had had either tutors or participated in prep schools; 3. the third group who had registered only in prep schools.

Table 1 Students' Personal Information

	Frequency	Percentage
Students who had never had any tutors.	37	16.97%
Students who had had either tutors or participated in prep schools.	106	48.62%
Students who had registered only in prep schools.	75	34.40%

The first group (16.97%), who had never had any tutors, included those students who believed in self-study and adequacy of the supplementary books to cope with the test. They reported that in order to get prepared for the INUEE, they had their own self-study only. Some of them pointed out that it was not difficult for them to practice the sample tests as they had a pile of supplementary books or the INUEE practice tests which could help them get ready for the test. In addition, they believed that there was no point attending the exam prep schools because they were exposed to sufficient amount of test coaching and practice for the INUEE in their regular English classes at schools. Here are two sample quotations from the questionnaires:

-I would rather stay home and practice for the INUEE. Going to prep schools only wastes our time in the streets [traffic jams]. Furthermore, the cost of prep schools is too high and my family cannot afford it...

-I used to go to prep schools for a short period of time and after a few sessions I decided not to continue the classes any longer, because they were giving us the tests every session and I was receiving low scores in the tests. This immensely de-motivated me and left me feel hopeless and disappointed...

The second group of respondents (48.62%) believed that in order to cope with the test, they had to have tutors or participate in prep schools for all the subject matters. They were enrolled not only in English classes but also in classes for other subject matters such as mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, etc. Two of their further comments are provided as follows:

-If anyone really wants to pass the test, she should go to prep schools...in prep schools students learn very helpful techniques to answer the multiple-choice questions...

-I am sure that going to prep schools is very important because we learn the tricks and strategies to easily find the correct choices of the INUEE test...they also teach the students how to manage the time in order to answer all the questions...

The third group (34.40%) consisted of those students who were only enrolled in prep schools. They considered prep schools to be very helpful for those who wanted to pass the test. Two of the students' additional comments are provided below.

-I decided to go to private English institutes because I felt that in my school classes I did not learn enough to be able to cope with the INUEE....

-There are many supplementary books in my bookshelf which can make me familiar with the format of the INUEE, but I prefer to go to prep school because they teach us the

shortest possible way of guessing the answers...sometimes we can guess the answers even without understanding the questions.

Purposes of the INUEE

In their questionnaire, the students were asked about their awareness concerning the INUEE. They were asked whether they knew how the INUEE looked like and which skills would be tested in it. Except 12 students who left the questions blank and 5 of the respondents whose answer was “NO,” the rest of the students (n=201) indicated that they were all familiar with the test. The students were also asked about the chief aim of the INUEE. Most of the respondents seemed to believe that the quintessential philosophy behind creation and administration of the INUEE was to evaluate student’s rote-memorization ability. Being given three options to choose from among, the students decided on the purpose of the INUEE as presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Purposes of the INUEE

	Frequency	Percentage
to evaluate student’s academic competence	54	24.77%
To evaluate student’s rote-memorization	149	68.34%
to choose intelligent students	15	6.88%

Below are two sample notes by the respondents in their questionnaires:

-I think the INUEE evaluates students’ scientific ability, so it is very hard to pass the INUEE for those who only memorize their lessons....those students who have learned well can pass the INUEE successfully...

-In my idea, most of the candidates who passed the INUEE had learned some tricks and strategies to answer multiple-choice questions....they passed it because they

knew those techniques, not because they knew more than those who failed.

Comparison of the students' viewpoints about the purpose of the INUEE revealed that over two-thirds of the students viewed the INUEE's primary function as evaluating students' rote-memorization ability, which could be an indication that the students' perception towards the INUEE was negative.

INUEE and Communicative Competence

The students were asked whether they considered the INUEE a valid test to evaluate their communication ability in English. The information related to the students' perceptions towards the capacity of the INUEE in evaluating communicative abilities are illustrated in Table 4.3 below.

Table 3 INUEE and Communicative Competence

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	121	55.04%
Disagree	88	40.36%
Agree	9	4.12%
Strongly Agree	0	0

As shown by Table 3, an overwhelming majority of the students either *disagreed* (40.36%) or *strongly disagreed* (55.04%) with the idea that the INUEE could evaluate their communication ability in English. They pointed out that neither their pre-university textbook nor the INUEE did encourage them to improve their communicative skills. From among 218 students only 4.12% of the students believed in the capacity of the INUEE for evaluating communicative abilities. Below are the two sample quotations written in the open-ended part of students' questionnaires:

-In our English classes we never practice speaking skill. We do not have any exercise in our books to help us learn to speak and make communication. I cannot speak in English at all; I like to learn English for communication not for the exam.

-The INUEE only encourages us to memorize vocabulary and grammar. In the INUEE sample tests, I have never seen any question related to listening or speaking skill. ...the INUEE samples focus on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension.

The findings demonstrate that almost all of the students doubted the validity of the INUEE to evaluate their communicative competence. This clearly shows that the majority of students perceived the INUEE as a test designed to evaluate abilities other than their communicative skills.

INUEE and English knowledge

Students were inquired as to whether the INUEE had affected their English learning positively or not. As illustrated by Table 4, most of the respondents either *disagreed* (31.6%) or *strongly disagreed* (42.66%) that the INUEE had enriched their knowledge of the English language. From among 218 students, 14.7% of students *agreed* and 11% of them *strongly agreed* that the INUEE had enriched their English knowledge and encouraged them to learn English.

Table 4 INUEE and English Knowledge

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	93	42.66%
Disagree	69	31.6%
Agree	32	14.7%
Strongly Agree	24	11%

Two sample quotations from the student's questionnaires about the role of the INUEE in improving the students' English language knowledge are presented below.

-I feel that my grammar knowledge has improved and I have added to the number of my [English] words since I started the pre-university period because I have to learn them if I want to pass the INUEE and enter university.

-I am not very sure that I would manage to do well in the English section of the INUEE this year, because I seem

to have forgotten many of the words and grammar points that I used to know...since I don't learn English at school out of interest, I tend to forget it easily....Actually, I like English very much but I do not like it when I have to study it for the INUEE or other English exam...

Table 5 INUEE and English Proficiency

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	110	50.45%
Disagree	78	35.77%
Agree	22	10.09%
Strongly Agree	8	3.66%

As clearly illustrated by Table 5, the majority of the students did not perceive the INUEE as having any positive effect on enhancement of their English proficiency. Two of the further comments provided by the responding students are as follows.

-I think the INUEE is not having a good and positive role in our learning...it does not improve our English knowledge. It only forces us to practice English for some time and then forget whatever we have learned because we only memorize the words and grammatical structures for the test, not for learning.

-I think the INUEE increases our English proficiency because I have memorized many words. I have memorized many words in my pocket dictionary for the INUEE...if it was not for the test, I might never memorize those words... I know the synonyms and antonyms of the words I have learned...

INUEE and Motivation

Students were also asked about the role of the INUEE in increasing their motivation toward English learning. They were enquired as to whether this high-stakes test had motivated them to study English or not. The majority's answers turned out to be in sharp contrast with those of the minority (as presented in Table 6 below). Whereas a majority of the

respondents ruled out the motivating role of the INUEE (56.3% of them *strongly disagreed* and 24.3% *disagreed* that the INUEE had motivated them to study English), 10.6% and 8.7%, respectively, *agreed* and *strongly agreed* with the idea that the INUEE had motivated them to learn English.

Table 6 INUEE and Motivation

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	123	56.3%
Disagree	53	24.3%
Agree	23	10.6%
Strongly Agree	19	8.7%

It is worth stating that some of those students who *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with the motivating role of the INUEE further highlighted that they had always been subjected to a heavy burden of psychological pressure caused by the INUEE, which rendered English learning a tiring and tormenting experience to them. They mentioned a variety of reasons for the ‘non-motivating’ role of the INUEE. Two sample quotations are provided below:

All the questions of the INUEE are multiple-choice type, so everyone only wants to learn test-tackling tricks rather than English itself. Learning English is not an end, and the main goal is to pass this life-changing test. For now what is important for me is passing the INUEE...

In our English classes, it is only the teacher who speaks all the time...we rarely participate in class activities...she is always worried about the limitation of the class time...she usually writes the INUEE sample tests on the board and she herself provides their answers. Our only duty is to listen and write down the important notes.

Overall, the majority of the participants did not view the INUEE as a motivator to learn English. Juxtaposing Table 6 with the additional comments provided by some of the students, one may deduce that

students hardly felt motivated to learn English for itself, but rather they had a strong motivation to pass the INUEE and enter university.

Students' Willingness to be Tested

In reaction to the statement '*I like being tested on my knowledge*', as shown in Table 7 below, 31.65% and 23.85% of the students *agreed* and *strongly agreed* respectively to be tested on their knowledge. In their further comments, some of them mentioned that, on the one hand, getting their knowledge tested would help them realize in which areas they would need to practice more and on the other hand, it would be a way to screen the weak and strong students with regard to their academic knowledge. In contrast the other respondents who either *disagreed* (17.88%) or *strongly disagreed* (26.6%) with the above-mentioned statement commented that they did not like being tested because studying for the test would increase their level of stress and anxiety.

Table 7 Students' Willingness to be Tested

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	58	26.6%
Disagree	39	17.88%
Agree	69	31.65%
Strongly Agree	52	23.85%

Here are two sample additional comments by the respondents:

-Repeated tests make us be grade-conscious...test forces us into cramming and memorizing the points only for a short period of time...I hate English and I think our teacher's wrong way of teaching and her very frequent tests are responsible for my negative feeling.

-I agree with the idea of testing and evaluating students, but I think testing English does not mean only testing grammar, vocabulary or reading. Other English skills

should be taught and be tested in order to help us find out whether we have had any progress in our learning or not.

INUEE and Anxiety

As clearly shown in Table 8 below, there was a considerable discrepancy between the reactions of the respondents towards the statement of ‘*I feel pressure and anxiety about the INUEE.*’ An overwhelming majority of the students *strongly agreed* (54.12%) and *agreed* (33.48%) that the INUEE put them under a lot of psychological pressure and anxiety. In contrast, only 10.55% of students *disagreed* and 1.83% of students *strongly disagreed* with the idea that the INUEE was a cause of stress and anxiety. The data clearly indicates that almost 90% of the students were subjected to the psychological pressure and anxiety caused by the INUEE.

Table 8 INUEE and Anxiety

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	4	1.83%
Disagree	23	10.55%
Agree	73	33.48%
Strongly Agree	118	54.12%

Here are two sample comments provided by the students in the questionnaires:

-I am under an unimaginable stress for the INUEE.... If I fail the INUEE, it will affect my siblings' motivation very badly. I don't want to let them down...My parents have in fact pinned down all their hopes on me. I am the oldest child and I should set a successful example for my other siblings. If, for any reason, I fail the INUEE, my parents will lose their hopes and will be disappointed...

-Sometimes my stress gets out of my hand and I become very aggressive and bad-tempered at home. The stress of

the INUEE affects my body and mind and sometimes I experience unexplained aches and pains in my body.

The students were asked whether the INUEE forced them to study English. As shown by Table 9, a clear majority of the students reported to have felt forced to study English.

Table 9 INUEE Forces Students to Study English.

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	15	6.88%
Disagree	21	9.63%
Agree	47	21.55%
Strongly Agree	135	61.92%

Two sample quotations of the students are provided below.

I can say the INUEE forces me to study English, but this studying is not out of interest...sometimes it is very boring to study something without a true interest and motivation....I have to study English because I need it to pass the test.

I like to study English for fun only. I hate it when I have to analyse the grammatical structures and answer multiple-choice questions: the way our teachers deal with English in our classes; there is no other choice...

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INUEE: To Change or Not to Change?

Except 39 students (17.88%) who believed that there should be no INUEE for entering universities, the other 170 respondents (77.9%) supported the idea that INUEE was a necessary mechanism of selecting the entrants to universities; nevertheless, they expressed their discontent with the existing format and contended that some fundamental changes were required to be made. From among the 170 students (in favor of the INUEE), 118 students *strongly agreed* (54.12%) and 35 students *agreed* (16.05%) that the INUEE needed to be changed. Small percentages of students *disagreed* (7.79%) and *strongly disagreed* (4.12%) with the introduction of any kind of change into the INUEE.

Table 10 Change of the INUEE

	Frequency	Percentage
Strongly Disagree	9	4.12%
Disagree	17	7.79%
Agree	36	16.5%
Strongly Agree	118	54.12%

Two of the students' additional comments in their questionnaires are provided below.

-The INUEE determines the students' future and destiny within a few hours... It is very difficult to enter universities. Some students are very smart and talented, but they cannot perform well when it comes to the INUEE with its multiple-choice format....

-I think the INUEE is not a good evaluator of the students' capabilities....It cannot put right people in the right places....Many of the students end in fields of study in which they are not interested at all, which means wasting the talents. This in turn could have negative consequences for the future career of the person as well as the society

because students feel they are forced into studying in a particular field or having a career in which they have no interest.

As mentioned above, the majority of the students agreed that the INUEE ought to be kept as an evaluating mechanism; nevertheless, they criticized the INUEE's existing system of assessment. They argued that having multiple-choice type of questions has made the test prone to cheating, chance, and memorization. Therefore, it would be better to add *production* types of questions (as opposed to *recognition* type) for those candidates who have problem in answering multiple-choice questions.

Table 11 INUEE and Studying English

	Frequency	Percentage
I would like to continue studying English	152	69.72%
I would not study English any more	43	19.72%

As Table 11 illustrates, most of the students would like to continue studying English even if there were no INUEE. From among 218 students, 23 students left the question blank and did not answer the question.

Discussion

Overall, the findings of the study indicated that the students' perceptions towards the INUEE were mixed: positive and negative. The students with positive attitudes perceived it as a test capable of evaluating the university applicants' academic knowledge as well as a factor prompting the students to intensify their efforts to study English. Although such a positive perception of the INUEE by a high percentage of the students (i.e., 42.18%) could be seen as a point of strength for the test, a scrutiny of the additional comments of the students revealed that they predominantly construed 'academic knowledge' as somehow equivalent to their level of vocabulary and grammar knowledge. Disregarding language in its communicative sense, most of the students seemed to see the lexico-grammar as the sole key to cope with the English section of the INUEE. To most of the respondents, knowing a

long list of vocabulary by heart coupled with a 'good' knowledge of English grammar rules was obviously a strong parameter determining their success in the test. It is a truism that despite its popularity among the respondents, such a conception of language learning has long been questioned. Glasser and Bassok (1989) asserted that language learning should be seen as a constant process of interpretation and construction of meaning, rather than an act of memorizing discrete pieces of information, each piece independent of the others.

In addition, a clear majority of the students *strongly agreed* and *agreed* that the INUEE forced them to intensify their efforts towards studying English, although the interpretation of the word "force" among the students was conspicuously variable. Those with a positive interpretation argued that they would not have been studying English at all if there had been no 'force'. Given the socio-contextual status of the English language in Iran, the positive role ascribed by the students to the forcible role of the INUEE sounds plausible. In fact unlike ESL contexts (e.g., India and Malaysia) where English has permeated the very fabric of society and carries a high instrumental value and communicational function, English is regarded as a foreign language (EFL) in Iran (Yarmohammadi, 2005) where it is seldom used in the wider context of society and the use of the language is almost limited to English classes at schools. Hence, it could be argued that even if the INUEE fails to follow communicative purposes, it at least has had the positive role of engaging the students with English in one way or another.

On the other hand, the respondents whose interpretation of the INUEE's forceful role was negative contended that the test intensified their tendency to cram for the test. They reported that as the test date got closer and closer, they tended to further intensify their efforts to memorize more vocabulary items and review through their grammar notes. The students also noted that they allocated a considerable amount of time for practicing test-taking tricks and strategies both in their classrooms and during their self-study at home. One plausible explanation for such a tendency among the students could be the influence of the INUEE on their learning behavior. Their language learning seemed to have been guided by the test. According to Bailey

(1996, p. 264), students' engagement in "studying vocabulary and grammar rules" and "applying test-taking strategies" could be an indication of the washback effect of tests on learners. In addition, some of the students stated that they would skip some of the classroom sessions for the "unimportant" subject matters of the INUEE (e.g., geology with the weighting of 0) and instead would spend their time on other subject matters such as English which has the weighting of 2. According to Bailey (1996), skipping classes to study for the test could be a sign of negative washback effect of the test.

Many of the students perceived the test to be incapable of evaluating their English knowledge and communicative ability. The INUEE was mainly viewed as a test which majorly tested the learners' rote-memorization ability, and a formidable exam which put the students under a great deal of stress and psychological pressures. In their questionnaires, most of the students reported that the INUEE had negative implications on their health and lives ranging from eliminating their entertainments and disrupting their eating habits to slashing their sleeping hours. Other researchers (e.g. Huang, 2002; Shih, 2006, 2007; Shohamy, 1996) have reported high levels of stress and anxiety induced by high-stakes tests which lead to negative washback.

As far as the INUEE is concerned, apart from the high-stakes nature of the exam which could naturally make it somewhat formidable to the students, the norm-referenced nature of the test as well as the score-consciousness prevailing among Iranian students (Hosseini, 2007) are the other factors intensifying the sense of competitiveness, and consequently anxiety among the candidates. Socio-contextually speaking, managing to get higher scores is equated with being more "knowledgeable" in Iran. Therefore, the process of teaching and learning is controlled by the grade pressure from society in general and parents, family, teachers, and classmates in particular. In addition to this, given the function of the INUEE as a 'bridge' to the higher education, score-consciousness is even further amplified in that failing to answer even one single question, a candidate may fall behind his/her rivals by a considerable margin. Similar cases of score-consciousness of the students about high-stakes tests in other contexts of education are recorded in the literature (Mizutani, 2009; Stewart, Gray & Pilcher,

2007). The studies found that the students' main concern was accumulating the credits rather than learning itself.

Students' anxiety towards the INUEE constitutes one of the important factors intensifying the negative washback effect of the test. The dominance of "culture of competition" on the micro-scale of families (parents) as well the macro-scale of the society is one of the major sources of stress and anxiety towards the test. The matter of the fact is that learning for the sake of genuine learning has given way to learning for the purpose of showing off the university 'degrees'. Obtaining university certificates under any circumstances and 'at any price' seems to be their first and main purpose of studying for the INUEE. English is viewed as a subject of high weightage on the INUEE, which could affect their final score and ranking on the test.

The test was also perceived to have poor validity. Over 70% of the students were in favor of making some modifications to the INUEE. The two most frequent themes extracted from the students' 'additional comments' were related to their complaints about the one-shot case testing procedure of the INUEE as well as its testing format. The respondents seemed to be seriously doubtful about the validity of the INUEE; they questioned the test's capacity of measuring their knowledge in the matter of a couple of hours and also complained that the monopolized use of multiple-choice test type in the INUEE was not only unfair, but also it could hardly reflect the students' genuine language ability. Many of the students argued that one's lack of familiarity with the so-called short-cut methods of coping with the multiple-choice questions could cost him/her failing the test despite being in possession of good language knowledge. They mostly viewed the INUEE as capable of gauging their rote-memorization skill rather than their communicative competence. According to Ewing (1998), focusing solely on multiple-choice test format could be seen as a limiting factor and a menace to authentic assessment. Making a paradigmatic distinction between psychometric testing paradigm and edumetric assessment paradigm, Farhady (2006) argued that the shortcomings of psychometric paradigm have prompted the theoreticians to abandon 'testing' in favor of 'assessment'. According to him, one of the most fundamental criticisms leveled against

psychometric testing paradigm has been its administration of one-shot case testing procedure and using multiple-choice tests.

Conclusion

The study found that students held both positive and negative perceptions about the INUEE. All the students with either positive or negative views believed that what they needed to do at that juncture was to strive for the INUEE rather than to genuinely learn English, which could be an indication that the INUEE had a negative washback effect on learners' language learning. Peer competition augmented by the score-consciousness of the students and the INUEE itself as well as the norm-referenced nature of the test were obviously among the factors contributing to the negative washback effect of the test.



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