

Investigating the Wash back Effects of Remedial English Tests within the Context of the University of Sindh

Saima Murtaza Pandhiani, Farida Yasmeen Panhwar

Abstract

Teaching and Testing form two dimensions of the learning spectrum. Researchers argue that tests are powerful magnets to bring about improvement in the teaching- learning experience. The impact of testing on classroom practices is commonly known as wash back. Wash back is normally examined in relation to the extent to which it guides teaching and learning positively or negatively. The purpose of the present study is to investigate how Remedial English tests affect classroom teaching and learning at the University of Sindh. To study classroom practices interviews of teachers and learners were conducted. The findings were verified through observation of Remedial English classes towards the end of the semester. The study indicated clear signs of wash back on students learning behavior and instructional practices of the teachers. The study proved that wash back does exist within the context of UoSJP and it operates in a highly complex method affecting not just teachers and learners but the 'how' and 'what' of teaching as well.

Keywords: Wash back, teaching-learning, classroom practices, learning behavior.

1.1 Introduction

Theory and practice go hand in hand when it comes to teaching and assessment within educational institutions. Testing is generally considered to be the culminating point of teaching; therefore, it has bearing not just on learners but on teachers, curriculum and institutions as well. “Testing is never a neutral process and always has consequences” (Stobart, 2003, p.140). Wall (1997) defines wash back as “wash back (also known as backwash) is sometimes used as a synonym of impact, but it is more frequently used to refer to the effects of tests on teaching and learning” (p. 291). Wash back may be positive or negative considering whether it promotes or impedes achievement of educational goals set forth by the learners or institutions (Bailey, 1996).

The study intends to investigate the wash back of Remedial English classes at The University of Sindh.

1.2 Research Questions

The study attempts to answer the following Research Question:

R.Q 1: Does wash back exist within Remedial English classrooms of UoSJP?



1.3 Context of the Study

The study tries to examine some of the claims we come across as language teachers about communicative language teaching and testing. R. E course was introduced back in 2001 in UoSJP, with a view to improving the language skills of the students across all the 6 faculties of the university. While the course has undergone various changes over the years, the testing of R.E still remains problematic and largely ignored. R. E is tested mainly through theoretical tests that concentrate on the theoretical component of the course rather than on its communicative content. My study aims to pin point the impacts of these tests on class room activities. The study will see whether wash back exists within the English class rooms or not. And if wash back exists its influence is negative or positive.

1.4 Significance

Wash back has been examined in various contexts (Romberg, Zarinnia and Williams, 1989; Wilson and Corbett, 1989; Smith, 1991a; 1991b; McLaurin, 1992; Herman and Golan, 1993). Wash back studies within ESL/EFL are even fewer. My study aims to fill in this gap. To the best of my knowledge, my study is the very first one of its nature within the context of Sindh. The aim of this small research is neither to support nor falsify any of the wash back hypothesis. It, rather aims to look at what happens in the R.E class rooms as a result of its tests.

2.1 Wash back Studies

In literature regarding testing in education, there is an underlying assumption that test impact does exist (Baker, 1991). Messick (1989) calls it *consequential validity* and Fredericksen and Collins (1989) call it *systemic validity*. A review of relevant literature on test impact reveals four emerging themes:

- 1) Contraction of the syllabus (Madaus, 1988; Cooley, 1991).
- 2) Misplaced time of teaching (Smith et al., 1989).
- 3) Condensed stress on skills that entail intricate thinking or problem-solving (Fredericksen, 1984; Darling-Hammond and Wise, 1985).
- 4) *Test score pollution*, or amplification of marks in tests without a supplementary increase in skills which are being tested (Haladyna, Nolan and Haas, 1991).

Since no such study has been conducted within the context of Sindh University, the presence or absence of the above stated concerns cannot be confirmed.

3.1 Wash back Hypothesis

Alderson and Wall (1993) studied wash back with the simplest assumption that tests affect teaching. Thus, the following fifteen hypotheses were proposed:

- 1) Tests affect teaching.
- 2) Tests affect learning.
- 3) Tests affect what is being taught by teachers.

- 4) Tests affect how teachers teach.
- 5) Tests affect what students learn.
- 6) Tests affect how students learn.
- 7) Tests affect the route and rate of teaching.
- 8) Tests affect the pace and style of learning.
- 9) Tests determine the efficacy and amount of teaching.
- 10) Tests determine the extent and intensity of learning.
- 11) Tests determine attitudes towards curriculum and style of teaching and learning.
- 12) Tests which have significant consequences for learners will have wash back.
- 13) There might be no wash back in case of less consequential tests.
- 14) Such tests will have wash back on all teachers and students.
- 15) Testing might have wash back for some teachers and learners not all.

By presenting these hypotheses Alderson and Wall (1993) only intended to set the line of inquiry for researchers to follow, rather than arguing for or against any one of these hypothesis. Their study of impact in Sri Lankan context revealed that wash back is a complex phenomenon and varies from context to context.

4.1 Rationale behind the Study

R.E is a mandatory subject for first year undergraduate students across all departments at UoSJP. The total marks and credit hours for the subject are the same as major subjects in all the disciplines .i.e. 100 Marks and 16 credit hours. Thus, R.E affects overall result of the students considerably. Moreover, due to the significance of English language, failing this subject most of the students take it more seriously than their majors.

As far as the influence of R.E tests is concerned nothing is yet known or empirically tested. The impact of these tests on classroom pedagogy and curriculum is yet to be tested. This study is a step further in this regard.

5.1 Data Collection

The study employed three kinds of data collection methods;

- 1) Student Interviews.
- 2) Teacher Interviews.
- 3) Class room Observation.

Data collection was carried out a few weeks before the second semester examination as this is the time of maximum activity at UoSJP. There is maximum number of students in the classes and last few lectures are assumed to be more important by the students as they get course outline etc during this time. For observation, though I had decided to observe one whole block of classes; that is one semester but due to my own classes and some other practical considerations I observed R.E classes only for 2 weeks.

The R.E course is based upon one text book prepared and approved by Higher Education Commission of Pakistan. The purpose of the course is to improve the four English language skills; reading, writing, speaking and listening. The book has no

separate sections for the skills; however activities and exercises are divided in such a way as to facilitate language skills.

5.2 An Understanding of the Research Site

It's significant to have an understanding of the site and participants of the study to fully understand the context of the study. At UoSJP R.E is taught by all faculty members of Institute of English Language and Literature .The faculty members consist of teachers having Masters and PhD level qualification in Linguistics as well as literature. Additionally, some teachers are hired by the university from various other institutions, who are called Tutors. They are paid separately for the course and they come only to their respective departments to teach R.E.

For the present study I interviewed some 12 teachers including the two teachers who were later observed. This included eight faculty members and remaining were Remedial Tutors.

For class room observations I contacted two permanent faculty members of IELL, who agreed to participate. Both teachers were male and senior faculty members. One teaches at science faculty (Chemistry) another at arts faculty (sociology).

The students selected for the study were all aged between 19 to 23, in the first year of their undergraduate studies. I selected students from both Science and Arts faculties for the study. From Science faculty Chemistry department was selected and from Arts Economics.

From each department 10 students, both male and female were invited for interviews. The interviews were recorded on cell phone device and later transcribed for analysis.

6.1 Findings

6.1.1 Learner Attitude towards R.E Classes

Most of the learners interviewed had positive attitude towards R.E classes. They showed clear signs of wash back as majority wanted to attend the classes for passing the exams not for improving English.

The learners indicated that they study only 'important questions'. When asked what are important questions? They replied those questions that repeatedly appear in the examination.

The students had an altogether different concept of course outline. They said course outline is what will come in the paper against what has been taught in the classrooms.

Some students complained that those students get good marks in R.E who are neither regular in the class nor participate in any activities. They earn good grades owing to the fact that they get ready made lecture notes from their siblings or friends.

The interview data was collected mainly to see if the learners showed wash back signs regarding R.E classes. Most of the questions that the students were asked were

centered round this topic. Students demands and expectations regarding R.E were also given due consideration. Major findings of learner interviews are as follows:

- a) Test Wiseness: Most of the students showed *test wiseness* to the exclusion of all topics they considered unimportant from examination point of view.
- b) Learner Participation: Most of the learners felt there was less participation of students in the classrooms. The 60 minute classes left little or no time for questioning as the classes are overcrowded accommodating 150 plus students in one class usually. Some students showed the concern that teachers mind questioning and become personal in such situations. Thus the R.E classes are nor communicative as proposed by the course objectives.
- c) Lack of Facilities: Sindh University does not have a language laboratory. R.E in most departments is taught in the morning when mostly there is power shut down. The departments either have no multimedia or the teachers are reluctant to use them. Learners find this lecturing boring.
- d) Listening Skills: The text book mentions listening to audio tapes but the learners had no idea where the tapes were available .They said that teachers read the passages or make the students recite. Because of this very reason most of the students felt their listening was weak.
- e) Test Preparation Behaviors and Methods: Most of the students indicated during interviews that they had little or no exposure to English outside their classrooms. They relied on lectures or readymade notes provided to them by senior students, friends, siblings etc. Students said they relied on self study by memorizing ‘Important Questions’. Some students however said they do combined study by dividing work load of making notes. The topics are divided among the group for making notes and later the notes are shared and memorized by the group members.

6.1.2 Teachers’ Attitude towards R.E Classes

Most of the teachers had a negative attitude towards R.E classes. They felt that the course is not much different from the non communicative English Compulsory course that it replaced. The classes are very crowded and unavailability of multimedia makes it difficult to teach communicative skills to the learners.

Majority of teachers claimed that students are irregular and uninterested in English language. To them (the students), it’s just another subject they must pass in order to get their degrees. Some teachers also felt that they feel strained because of semester system to complete enough courses for paper setting. For this reason they can’t focus on improving language skills of the learners.

Most of the teachers said that teaching R.E is very easy and it takes little or no preparation. They said that they don’t lesson plan so it’s up to them what and how to teach. Since the classes are large the teachers don’t give home assignments to students as they don’t get time to check and return the work.

A teacher pointed out that the R.E course is mostly fragmented due to holidays and an announced calling off of classes before national festivals like Eid etc. Teacher 1 said *'students are regularly irregular, it's next to impossible to finish course in time. We have to complete six chapters per semester so there remains little time for interactive activities'*.

The focus of the teachers is mostly on the written components of the course as the paper format is solely based upon writing. Even speaking is checked through written exercises like 'complete the dialogue' type of questions.

6.1.3 Class room Observations

Since evidences of wash back as established by Alderson and Wall (1993) have been mainly based on perceptions and opinions rather than on empirical evidences, a very important part of the present data comes from actual classroom observations. Patton (1990, p. 25) suggests that "to understand fully the complexities of many situations ... observation of the phenomenon of interest may be the best research method".

For classroom observations both the participant teachers showed their discomfort at being audio taped or recorded so I had to rely on my field notes. I observed on the whole 6 classes of both teachers. For collected rich data I also conducted small talks and post observation interviews with both the teachers.

The following variables came out and were focused during the observation:

- 1) Teachers' talk time.
- 2) Students Participation/ Students time per class.
- 3) Teachers' turn per class.
- 4) Time available for students.
- 5) Percentage of active students.
- 6) Frequency of questions and answers by teacher at the end of the class.
- 7) Frequency of questions and answers by students per class.
- 8) Use of humor by the teacher during each class.
- 9) Pair activities/ group activities during each class.
- 10) Presentations during each class.

Table 1: Findings of classroom observation

| | |
|--|---------|
| Teachers' talk time. | 82% |
| Students Participation/ Students time per class. | 18% |
| Teachers' turn per class | 8 |
| Time available for students | 20% |
| Percentage of active students | 10%-18% |
| Frequency of questions and answers by teacher | 40% |
| Frequency of questions and answers by students per class | 20% |
| Use of humor by the teacher during each class. | 2%10% |
| Pair activities/ group activities during each class. | 0-10% |
| Use of presentations | 20%-30% |

The results of interview data and observations were combined together to study what was going on inside R.E classes and whether there were any indications of wash back or not.

7.1 Discussion

The following findings were indicated by the data:

- Teachers talk more than students in R.E classes.
- Students seemed to be interested only in ‘what will come in the paper’.
- Test-taking is less common due to work load of the teachers.
- Almost none or less time is spent on pair and group work.
- R.E classes are very much like other routinized English compulsory classes.
- Individual presentations are given time and importance in R.E classes.
- These classes allow little room for laughter and are very much humor less.

Table 2: Impressions of Teaching Style

| Classroom Setting | level |
|--|---|
| Teacher on podium | Undergraduate |
| Seats in Rows | Students age between 19-23 |
| | Strength of students per class 80-100 |
| Method | |
| Teacher asks students to read from the text | Teacher calls on students to answer questions in random order not sequentially. |
| Teacher rarely uses blackboard | Teacher comes 10 minutes late usually |
| Teacher uses text book to teach language | Teacher also uses real life examples to explain text |
| Little happens from the students’ side | Teacher sometimes appears un prepared |
| Students almost always seem unfamiliar with text | Students answers are usually wrong or round about |
| Teacher goes through the text items with the same pace | Class keeps being disrupted by late coming students |

The data indicated that students study R.E just for passing the exams a sits a mandatory subject. Data collected from teachers revealed that there is no significant difference in the teaching methods of R.E and other English language compulsory courses. The teachers showed somehow resistant attitude towards test taking, home works and above all lesson planning. Because of this very reason most of the classes appeared un planned. The teachers were strained on how to make the course content more interesting. The traditional lecturing methods were adopted in most of the classes in which the learners were passive or semi passive.

R.E classes seemed teacher dominated mostly and consisted of long textual / grammatical explanations. Students got little time to practice the meta language they were taught. This appeared a naïve / in effective method of teaching a communicative course. Most of the teachers and even students seemed to believe the assumption that the very act of test taking is bound to improve test performance.

8.1 Conclusion

The study shows that tests certainly affect what is taught and how it is taught. It could be safely concluded that it's not just the test that causes wash back, but the teachers, course writers and administrators are equally responsible for the phenomenon. The teachers are not properly trained in teaching communication skills. Those teachers who have a Masters degree in literature are also teaching R.E. Since the teachers are not properly equipped with teaching methodology, their teaching remains ineffective rather ill suited to the communicative course.

The course on the other hand consists of heavy discourses which are not suitable for teaching English language skills to the students. The exercises given in the text consist of discrete items or activities which are independent of one another. Moreover, the large number of classes and the limited amount of time granted to R.E makes practice of English highly difficult within the span of two semesters.

9.1 Limitations and Suggestions

The current study was conducted on a smaller scale just to note if wash back exists within the context of Sindh University. The study didn't not look at the efficacy of R.E classes, which is altogether a different research topic and can be researched independently. The same study could be conducted on a larger scale to have an in depth study of wash back as presented by Alderson and Wall (1993). The data collected for the present research could be explored further and more interpretive possibilities could be achieved. The wash back hypothesis is though confirmed in some degree by the present study however, it needs to be further studied. Alderson and Wall (1993) propose, "Tests will have different amounts and types of wash back on some teachers and learners than on other teachers and learners". This aspect of wash back can be studied in a future study.

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