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TEST-TAKERS' FEEDBACK ON WASHBACK IMPACT OF THE  
ANNUAL EXAMINATION OF M.A. IN ENGLISH LITERATURE  
FROM COLLEGE SIDE

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper examines the importance of feedback on Washback Impact of the annual examination of M.A in English Literature from test-takers to improve the quality and validity of the exam. M.A in English Literature is recognized as most prestigious degree as compared to other master degree programs from college side. It opens the doors of opportunities of jobs for candidates. The University of Sindh started Master Degree Program in English Literature at Government Girls College, Hyderabad and Government College, Kali Mori. The examination was conducted in 2015 by University of Sindh. The 400 test-takers appeared in the annual exam. To investigate the feedback from the test-takers the qualitative approach was used in this study. The research instrument for data collection used was semi-structured interviews. The participants of the study were 20 male and female candidates of the two local colleges of district Hyderabad. The participants were of the same age group from 23 to 24 years. The results and findings showed that test-takers have strong positive and negative consequences of the examination. Their utmost desire was to share their views about the exam to the university authority. The significance of the study is feedbacks from test-takers are important to enhance the quality and validity of the exam and it helps test developers to maintain quality and validity of the exam.*

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**Keywords:** Test-takers, Feedback, Washback Impact, Quality and Validity of exam.

**INTRODUCTION**

Since the inception of Pakistan, the English has been a symbol of power and weapon to change class status (Rehman, 1996). M.A in English is a vehicle to enter in high ranks posts like bureaucracy, armed forces, immigration and to enter in foreign services. The University of Sindh started a degree program of M.A. in English Literature at Government College, Hyderabad. The number of students got enrolled in the program with high expectations to secure good jobs and change their

financial status. It is a high stakes exam in the present scenario. High-stakes exams the public that immediately or directly affect them (Madus, 1985). The effect of the high-stakes exam on its stake holders in applied linguistics in knowing as Washback effect (Alderson and Wall, 1993) is of utmost importance to address the voice of the stakeholders, those who get affected by the result of these high-stakes exams. Out of these stakeholders, the test-takers are directly affected by the examination. High-stakes tests have an impact on society and educational system and on the individuals within the system (Bachman and Palmer, 1996:29). Tests relates to real people's lives. As quoted by Shohamy (1998:332) tests are more powerful as they are often the single indicators for determining the future of individuals. Therefore, this study focused on the determinate factors of test that decided the future of candidates as well as future of the whole program's failure and success.

#### **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY**

This paper is based on Bachman and Palmers' (1996) hypothesis that the test-takers are affected by the test in three different ways.

1. The experience of preparing and taking of the test.
2. The feedback they receive in the form of a score.
3. The decisions made about their future on the basis of the score.

#### **THE GOAL OF THE STUDY**

Keeping in view theoretical framework of the paper central goal of this study was to get feedback of the test-takers on the Washback impact of M.A in English literature from college side. The goal of the study was to accomplish through semi-structured interviews. The need of this study was to hear most neglected voice of test-takers voice and suggestions for the future test strategy by the university authority.

#### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

1. What are the opinions of test-takers about the annual exam of M.A in English Literature from college side?
2. How does affect their lives and how do they see the programs validity and quality?

#### **STRUCTURE OF THE COURSE OF M.A IN ENGLISH LITERATURE**

M.A in English Literature is the two year program from college side. The first year is known as M.A previous and second year is known as M.A final. The whole degree program collectively consists of ten subjects. These subjects are shown in the following tables.

**TABLE-1**  
**COURSE OF M.A ENGLISH**

<b>M.A. (Previous) Subjects</b>	<b>M.A. (Final) Subjects</b>
History of English Literature	Literary Essays
Drama	Literary criticism
Classical Poetry	Fiction
Romantic Poetry	Western Literature
Prose	Viva voce

**TABLE-2**  
**THE PAPERS OF ANNUAL EXAM OF M.A IN ENGLISH LITERATURE**

<b>M.A. (Previous)</b>	<b>M.A. (Final)</b>
Paper I History of English Literature	Paper I Literary Essays
Paper II Drama	Paper II Literary Criticism
Paper III Classical Poetry	Paper III Western Literature
Paper IV Romantic Poetry	Paper IV Fiction
Paper V Prose	Paper V Viva Voice

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Washback:** The Washback mechanism is a recognized fact, in general education and in Applied Linguistics. The pioneers of Washback in general education use the term Backwash and the pioneers of Washback in the field of Applied Linguistics uses the term Washback. There is no difference in Washback or Backwash, these terms are interchangeable. The Washback in simple terms is defined as the effects of test or exam on its stakeholders. The stakeholders of the exam are students, teachers, parents, and school, college and university authorities. According to Cohen (1994:41), Madus (1988) said Washback is widely accepted in language testing. Bachman and Palmer (1996) suggested that tests have a very strong impact on individuals, society and the entire system of education. Another perspective of Washback is the Systemic Validity of a test that is the integration of a test into the educational system.

**Theoretical models of Washback:** The Washback concept has a strong theoretical background Alderson and Wall gave 15 hypotheses of Washback, that test effects on the teachers and students and teaching and learning process. Another model of Washback was given by Bailey (1996), which is based on Hughes' tracheotomy. Bailey's model suggests that the test influence participants' activities, attitudes, behavior towards the test, a process that runs according to the requirements of the test and

product as a result of the whole test process. Furthermore, focus of Bailey's model is on feedback they receive on the test. The feedback which may bring about changes to tests, signifying the possibility of wash forward. The comprehensive model of Washback was given by Green in 2007. This model is comprehensive because it incorporates Alderson and wall's (1993) model as well as Bailey's (1996) model, with a number of new features and characteristics regarding Washback. Green's (2007) model focuses on Washback variability, intensity and test difficulty.

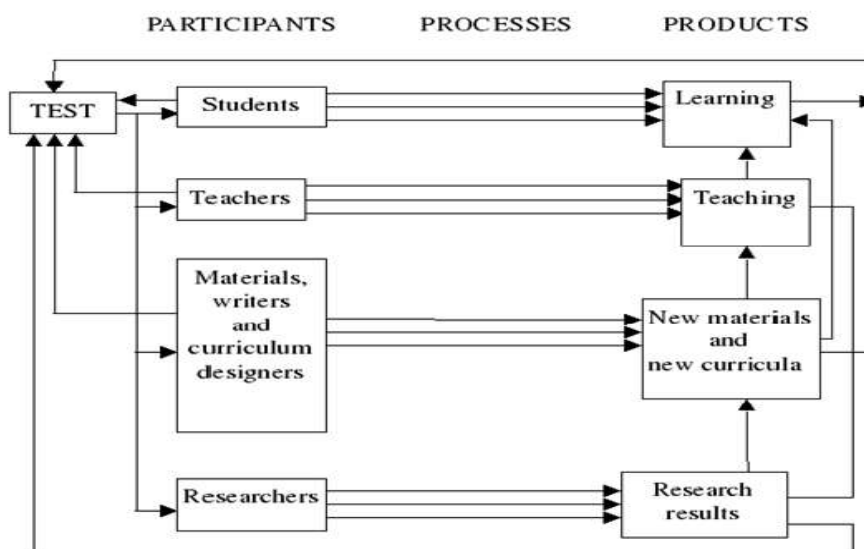


Figure-1: A Basic Model of Washback (as cited in Bailey, 1996:264)

**Empirical Studies on Washback:** Alderson and Hemp-Lyons (1996) investigated Washback effect of TOEFL preparation courses at the three institutions in the USA. Their participants were language learners. They interviewed test-takers. The language learners were asked their ideas about TOEFL preparation classes. The students stressed the importance of practicing English all the time. Adnan *et.al.*, (2014) investigated Washback effect of Intermediate exam on teaching and learning of English in Pakistan. The study was aimed to investigate the causes of low level of English proficiency. The study used survey questionnaire. Survey questionnaire of ten questions was used. They found that the intermediate exam had a negative effect on content and teaching materials.

Another research conducted by Memon (2015) focused on the impact of IELTS Pakistan programs on candidates' performance in Pakistan. The study aimed to examine that how far IELTS preparation courses were effective in improving the performance of the students. The mixed methods were used in data collection and data analysis. It included stake –holders: IELTS test preparation providers, IELTS preparation teachers and IELTS test preparers. The findings of the study were that the courses were not effective in improving the score of the students. The courses were expensive and duration of the courses was short. The candidates' language proficiency was lower for IELTS. Jilani (2009) evaluates intermediate exams. She expressed her experience as a teacher and reflection on the impact of high school exam. The findings were that exams had negative Washback effects. She suggested that higher attention should be paid to the exams in order to avoid negative Washback. Washback effects on English language teachers by Ahmad *et.al.*, (2012).

Shih in 2007 conducted a research in Taiwan. The interviews were conducted from 14 to 15 students, department chair and two to three English teachers and family members. The study also used classroom observations, department self-study center observation methods. Shih (2007) came up with the findings that Washback was intense in the secondary institutions. Shih proposed a tentative wash back model of student learning.

A study was conducted on investigation of the Washback effect of TOEFL preparation courses on language learners at three different institutions in the USA by Hemp-Lyons (1996). They used interviews as a data collection tool in the study to ask participants about their views on the TOFEL preparation courses. Alderson and Hemp-Lyons (1996) investigated the Washback effect of TOEFL preparation courses at the three institutions in the USA. Their participants were language learners. They interviewed test-takers. The language learners were asked their ideas about TOFEL preparation classes, their data analysis revealed learners emphasized on practicing English all the time.

In general education literature a joint Irish–American study was conducted by Callaghan, Madaus and Airisian to investigate the impact of standardized tests. Their study took time from 1974 to 1977. Their target population was students from grade 2 to 6 and teachers, parents and schools. They came up with standardized test results had little effect on school organization. Teachers and students in the program were positive. Parents showed very little impact of the experimental test.

Another study was conducted by Green in 2007. This study was considered as Washback to students as well as Washback to teachers. The focus of study was to find out the effects of various preparation courses for academic writing in higher education. The study was conducted in UK. The population of the study was 476 students of diverse nationalities. Teachers also participated in the study in a focus group and survey. Green used observation in this study. He came up with the findings that wash back effect was complicated and diverse to the learners. He stressed that it is essential for the students' perspective to be considered understanding overall wash back effects.

The study was conducted by Alderson and Wall (1993) in Srilanka. They investigated the effect of change of O level English examination. They completed their study in two years. It was an observational study. They came up with the findings that exam cannot determine how teachers teach. They suggested that change might influence the content of the materials.

Another study was conducted by Andrew, and Wong (200) in Hong Kong. They investigated advanced supplementary use of English test on students' performance. Their study took 3 years to complete. Their study revealed the nature of Washback on learners' performance.

#### **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The Washback researchers emphasized on the mix methodology for the investigation of the Washback. This is due to the reason it is complex phenomenon related to real peoples' lives. As Cheng, (2004) suggested that only qualitative research may not fully depict the whole picture.

Therefore, to investigate this effect Washback researchers emphasized on triangulation method to investigate it. Wall and Alderson (1993) favored observation as an important tool for collection of data while investigating Washback effect. Bailey (1996) emphasized on the use of both qualitative and quantitative data. The present study is qualitative in nature. The interviews were used as a data collection tool. Feedback can be answered well through interviews. The participants were test-takers of the same age group. The convenient sampling was used in this study.

**TABLE-3**  
**DATA COLLECTION TOOL, STAKEHOLDERS,**  
**NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS, PROGRAM**

Data collection tool	Stakeholders	Number of participants		Program
Interview	Test-takers	Govt: Girls College	Govt: College Kali Mori	M.A in English Literature
		Female (10)	Male (10)	
		Total = 20		

#### DATA ANALYSIS PROCEDURE

This study consisted of three phases. In the first phase, approval from participants to participate in the study was secured by thoroughly and clearly explaining the purpose of the study. The key terms of the study like Washback, Test-takers, exam consequences and consequential validity were explained to the participants. The informed consent was obtained from the participants. The second stage was of data collection through semi- structured interviews. The interview protocol consisted of eight questions. The duration of the interviews was 20 to 25 minutes. The one –on-one interviews were conducted and it took 2 weeks to conduct interviews. The interviews were recorded. In the final phase interviews were transcribed.

The transcribed data was analyzed to find out the codes, recodes and the themes, which is the core of the qualitative research. For this, the guidelines given by Johnay Salanda in her book were followed.

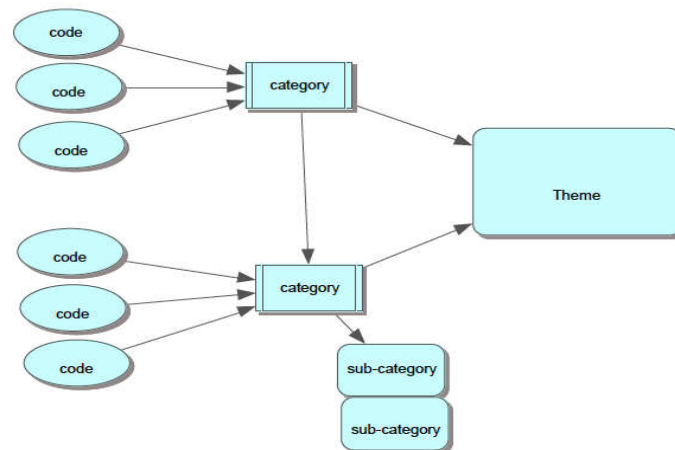


Figure: The themes were developed from codes and categories (Adapted from Saladana, 2009).

**FINDINGS OF THE STUDY**

The study was designed to address the feedback of test-takers in order to improve the validity and quality of the test. The theoretical background of the study is based on Bachman and Palmer (1996) hypothesis. When test-takers were asked about their experience of taking test, their response instead of being affirmative was in negation. The test-takers consider it their worse experience of life. Not even a single participants' response on their experience of taken test was satisfactory. As one participant pointed out "It has ruined my career". Their feedback about their experience of taking was disappointing. Shohamy (1996) said tests are powerful determiners of the future of test-takers. In this study the findings showed that the exam determined the future of test-takers as dark future not bright. The participants view about their future on the basis of the results showed that test and assessment had left a disastrous effect on the lives of test-takers. One participants' remark in this context was "To me it is worse than had happened to the heroes of Greek tragedy". Other participants' response in this regard was "The Fault lies in the system not in us".

These views by the participants reveals their lamentation about the exam. They gave the facts while showing their mark sheets that majority of the candidates were failed in the exam. Those who were declared pass got third division. To them third division was of no use as they are not even able to apply for jobs in private schools. They entered the program with the expectations to join civil services or appear in the commission exam which is now turned into nightmare.

The participant's response on the question of validity and reliability was not affirmative. They consider program of M.A. in English Literature seems to be failure. They came up with number of factors that why they consider the program fail. They gave valid reason that majority of the candidates had left the program after the result of M.A. part 1. The reason for this they gave that fees is high and university wants to earn more money by failing many candidates. The participants 'view about whether the assessment was biased or impartial was that they considered it biased one. As their paper were checked by a third party that is university. They were in the favor that assessment should be done by their college teachers instead of outsiders. For them this might be good sign to improve the quality and validity of test.

The course of M.A. in English literature is lengthy. It consists of 10 subjects. Each subject in turn consists of many books to cover. The participants discouraged the annual examinations system because to them it is hard to memorize the whole course. Furthermore, the participants'



belief about the annual exam system of M.A. in English Literature was it is not effective one. Their response to the question what challenges did they face was that tried hard to give their best in terms of presentations and writing skills. They focused on these skills as they were supposed to be marked through the writing skills. One of the interviewees said it was their illusion to improve writing skills for securing high grades in the examination.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS TO IMPROVE QUALITY & VALIDITY OF EXAM

The participant suggestions to make the program better are:

1. Semester system should be introduced in the college as they cannot cope up with two lengthy annual examinations.
2. The assessment should be done by their college teachers instead of the university teachers.
3. The marking criteria should be flexible as to give only passing marks means to play with the future of the candidates.

#### CONCLUSION

The current study focused on the importance of feedback of test-takers on Washback impact of the annual exam of M.A in English literature. This study revealed takers-takers had strong positive and negative consequences of the exam. The participants enrolled in the program with great expectations and high desires, but their results disappointed them. It seemed through the feedback, that program of M.A in English Literature attracts candidates but biased assessment not only ruined their career but also is the cause of the failure of the program. The number of participants is small in this study, therefore, it limits the generality of the findings. The study suggests that feedback from the test-takers is of prime importance to enhance the quality and validity of the exam. It helps the test developers to build a trust relationship with the candidates. They are the main players of this entire program. Therefore, their hue and cry should pay heed to improve the system.

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