NEGATIVE WASH-BACK OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT TO LEARNING IN SAUDI HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This article reports the wash-back of formative assessment on what students learn, how they learn and the depth of their learning in Saudi higher education context. Previous research indicates that assessment methods affect different aspects of learning either positively or negatively depending on the nature of assessment tasks. Observations indicate a clear association between Saudi students' learning and how their learning is assessed; so this research was needed to determine how exactly the correlation looked like—positive or negative. The data in this study were collected from Saudi undergraduates by employing a student survey and semi-structured interviews. The survey included Likert scale items of agreement regarding research assignments, quizzes and midterm examinations administered to 250 English-major students. To validate the survey results, sixteen students from different levels with GPA 3 and above were interviewed. The results showed that formative assessment narrowed down the scope of learning materials. The students mostly adopted surface level learning strategies to prepare for formative assessment tasks. Higher order thinking skills were not tested in any of the formative assessment methods. Therefore, it is suggested that assessments tasks should be subjected to thorough validation and moderation. Sound assessment practices should be put in place and practiced judiciously. To achieve these objectives, sustained institutional and departmental professional backing is a prerequisite.

Keywords: Higher Education, Formative Assessment, Constructive Feedback, Washback

INTRODUCTION

Formative assessment is a teaching tool. It helps the quality of what students learn, how they learn it and the depth of their learning. The underlying objective of using formative assessment is forming teaching and learning during a course. Assessment carried out at the end of a course does not tell teachers and students if the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. All they get to know is the final grades. Therefore, small scale classroom assessment techniques are used to assist teachers and students to bridge the gap between what is achieved and what is still to be achieved. Formative assessment demands time and concentration. Assessment tasks have to be served at the right time with timely feedback. Concentration is needed in designing valid assessment tasks. Carefree and haphazard approach to formative assessment will render the whole curriculum inconsequential. To learn how formative assessment influenced Saudi undergraduates learning process, an attempt was made in this research to determine the nature of the association that existed between formative assessment tasks and its washback (influence) to learners. The study was expected to add significant input to washback literature, particularly regarding the impact of formative assessment on learning in Saudi higher education setting. The following objectives and questions guided this research originally propounded by Alderson and Wall (1993):

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES
1. To explore how assessment affects what students learn.
2. To find out how assessment affects how students learn.
3. To investigate how assessment affects the depth of what students learn.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
1. How does formative assessment affect *what* Saudi undergraduates learn?
2. How does formative assessment affect *how* Saudi undergraduates learn?
3. How does formative assessment affect the depth of *what* Saudi undergraduates learn?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review is divided into two parts: (a) definition of washback and its forms, (b) empirical research conducted in the field already. Washback is the effect of an assessment tool on teaching and learning. It has been noted that instructors and students' do things they would not necessarily otherwise do because of test' (Alderson and Wall, 1993:117). For Messick (1996:241), washback is the 'the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influences language teachers and learners to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit learning'. According to Hughes (1989:1) washback is 'the effect of testing on teaching and learning'. Since washback cannot be stopped from happening, therefore, it is inevitable for the effect to be positive.

Before we decide that we cannot afford to test in ways that will promote beneficial backwash, we have to ask ourselves a question. What will be the cost of not achieving beneficial backwash? When we compare the cost of the test with the waste of effort and time on the part of teachers and students in activities quite inappropriate to their true learning goals…..we are likely to decide that we cannot afford not to introduce a test with a powerful beneficial backwash (Hughes, 1989:56).

Washback can be positive or negative. Positive washback is the beneficial impact of assessment on teaching and learning (Green 2007), mostly triggered by a strong correlation between a test's design and course objectives (Green 2006b). Negative washback is observed when teaching and learning blindly gear toward examination with learning objectives completely off the sight (Vallette, 1994). The unwanted effects of an assessment tool on teaching and learning which mostly occur due to weak assessment tools (Alderson and Wall, 1993; Cheng and Curtis, 2004) that are usually invalid (Green, 2006a). Negative washback may not necessarily have a single form. Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996, c.f. McCabe, 2003) have remarked that negative washback can be manifest in four areas. First, it can narrow down teaching materials. Second, it can restrict instruction time. Third, it can divert the focus of teaching and learning in classroom from the development of complex thinking or problem solving. Fourth, it culminates in increase of students' scores unaccompanied by the adequate achievement of the objectives of the course. Therefore, washback is a complex phenomenon (El-Ebyary, 2009; Saville and

Hawkey, 2004; Watanabe, 1997, and Alderson and Wall, 1993) because the impact of a test on teaching and learning is shaped by various interconnected variables, namely tests, learners, teachers and even the school leadership and policy makers (Green, 2007), materials developers and students' receiving or recruiting institutions (Saville and Hawkey, 2004). In a nutshell, washback is a holistic phenomenon for which to occur there has to be a favorable environment across 'the broad educational context under which an assessment is introduced' (Cheng, 1997:40).

Previous studies indicate that certain factors related to assessment be that formative or summative, trigger washback. Among them, assessment tasks' alignment with course learning outcomes, test consequences, authenticity of assessment tasks, and assessment task designing have been reported to be the most significant. These factors have had positive washback in certain contexts and negative washback in others. For instance, Tsagari (2009:8) found that learners practically equated learning for the test to learning English while studying for the First Certificate in English (FCE) proving washback being a highly complex phenomenon. Therefore, in order for assessment to have desirable influence on teaching and learning several other variables need to be taken into consideration such as 'textbook writers and publishers, teachers, students, schools, parents, local educational systems and local society'. Benedetti (2006) reported the results of a survey from the Language School of Guanajuato University in Mexico revealing that the application of a video documentary listening test instead of a simple audio test had greater positive impact on students learning. In Australia, the washback effect of Certificate in Spoken and Written English (CSWE) introduced by Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) on teachers had varied impact on teaching indicating multiple factors affecting teaching approach and asking for more focus on 'teacher' variable for desirable washback (Burrows, 2004). Hong Kong Education Authority (HKEA) introduced changes in the Hong Kong Certificate Examination in English to raise the standards of English language teaching and learning in Hong Kong secondary schools (Cheng, 2004). The study found that in principle teachers seemed to share HKEA's philosophy but field observations showed no significant change. The change was superficial. Negative washback was also noticed on teaching materials. In Israel, the Ministry of

Education introduced Oral Matriculation Test (OMT) to help students increase their communicative competence in English. The new test '…resulted in strong positive washback on the educational processes, the participants and the products of teaching and learning' (Ferman, 2004:204). It was noticed that parents, teachers, and students paid increased heed to the oral test. There was an obvious increase in the time allotted to the improvement of oral skills of students. Furthermore, the teaching and learning strategies employed were shaped to meet the test's requirements. In Egypt, El-Ebyary's study of the effect of formative assessment in teacher-training colleges indicated clear negative washback (2009) because the assessment criteria were not shared with students and the summative examination was more focused along with over emphasis on lexical and grammatical accuracy. In Canada, University of Victoria introduced an English language course to help the International Teaching Assistants (ITAs) solve communication issues with undergraduates. Empirical evidence indicated that increased teacher awareness of the importance of the speaking test element in the course assessment of the experimental group had significant positive washback on 'the teacher's methodology, teaching activities, teaching contents, and learning activities by making these elements in line with 'the contents and goals of the test' (Saif, 2006:28). The studies reported above confirm that tests are bound to have washback on teaching and learning; however, to achieve the desirable washback conscious efforts have to be made.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data in this article is predicated on two research instruments. First a student survey was distributed among 250 Saudi undergraduates. The survey collected students' opinions and beliefs on a Likert scale of strongly agree (5) to strongly disagree (1) related to three formative assessment instruments: quizzes, research assignments and midterm examinations. The survey data were subjected to statistical analysis through SPSS for quantitative analysis that aimed at frequencies and percentages to gain an overview of the overall patterns in the students' views and opinions. The second instrument was a semi-structured interview to cross-validate the survey responses. Sixteen students with GPA 3 and above from different levels were interviewed to seek in-depth input on how 'the best' students studied and what they studied which would indirectly give information about

the low achieving students learning too. The interview data went through text analysis that involved familiarization with the transcriptions and coding the key information followed by thematic categorization.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first part of the questionnaire sought to know the students' research assignment writing practices. As indicated in Figure 1, two-third of the students agreed that for writing their assignments they studied a few pages of a single course book. But more alarming was what the students responded to the plagiarism related statements. More than 70% of the respondents as shown in Figure 2 agreed that they copied the content of their assignments instead of writing in their own words. Furthermore, 42% of the respondents (as can be seen in Figure 3) disagreed when asked if they failed when their assignments were plagiarized.
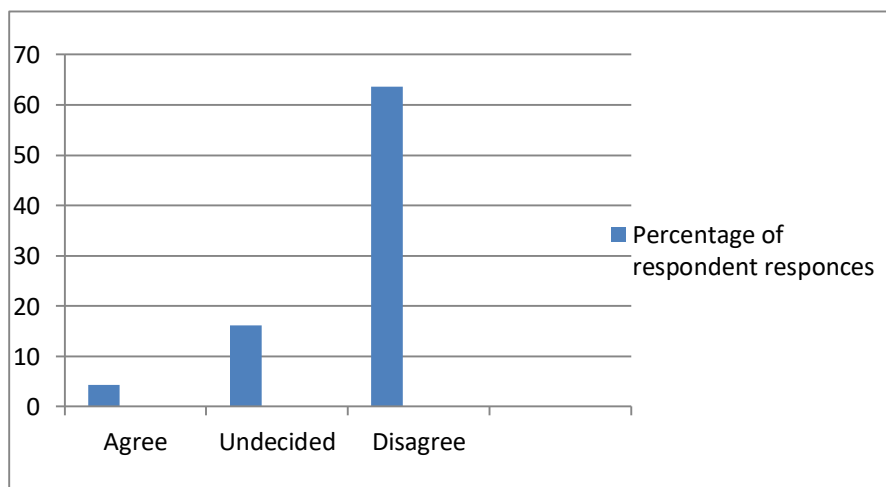
FIGURE-1
I STUDY SEVERAL PAGES OF A SINGLE COURSE BOOK
TO PREPARE MY ASSIGNMENTS
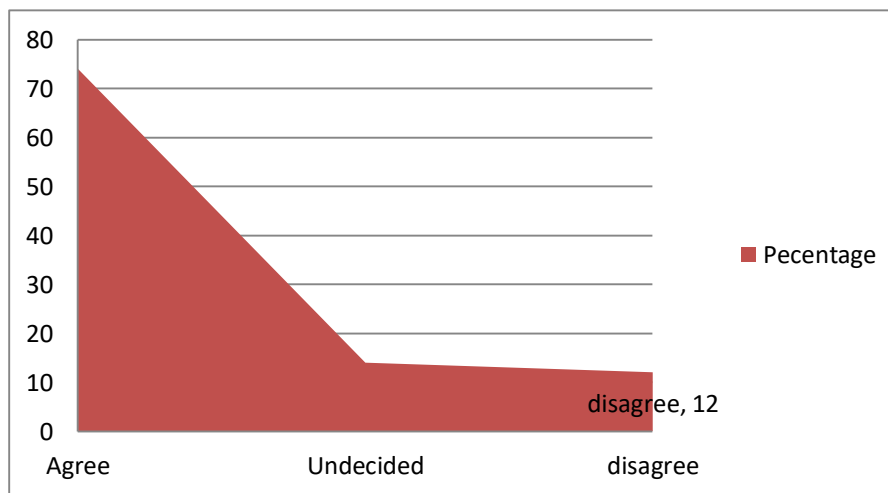
FIGURE-2
I COPY THE CONTENT OF MY ASSIGNMENTS FROM THE INTERNET OR MY COURSE BOOK
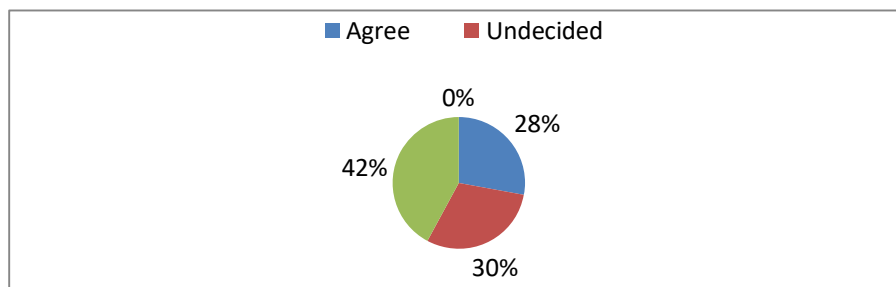
FIGURE-3
IF THE CONTENT OF MY ASSIGNMENT IS PLAGIARIZED, I FAIL IT

In the interviews, all students agreed that not every teacher asked for research assignments. One student explained the nature of the assignments. He said "The assignments were about one-page long. You can say about four paragraphs in total for each assignment. Actually, it was an essay. We copied it from the internet" (Student L, year two, GPA 3.7). None of the interview participants disagreed with this student. Student K studying in 4th semester explained in agreement with other (N#10) how they prepared an assignment for one of his courses. He stated that they were given only one assignment, which carried 10 marks that they had to submit a week before the final exam. For the assignment, the students could choose any topic. What

the teacher needed was the thesis statement, introduction, body and conclusion. Students were allowed to copy the content from the internet that is what most of them did. Because by following those steps we passed the assignments and got full marks. Responding to student K's statement, three students said they would copy the content of their assignment from the internet. One of the interview respondents said "I don't know research. I have never done any research type of study at this university. I know where the central library of the university is but I have never visited it.

University graduates in a knowledge-based society have to be researchers (Healey and Jenkins 2009a). However, student in many higher education contexts are practically not involved in any research related activities (University of Pennsylvania, 2017). Healey and Jenkins (2009b) have argued that to teach students research skills it is mandatory to assess their research skills through authentic research assignments. Their study showed that research assignments as a part of the assessment scheme were poorly utilized. Students lacked essential guidance regarding how to write research assignments. The absence of feedback was another significant issue. For adequate utilization of research assignments as an assessment tool, it is important for students to be aware of why they write the assignments, how their assignments would be graded, and finally constructive feedback should be provided (Heinrich, Milne, and Moore, 2009). There could be various reasons behind the 'misuse' of this useful assessment tool such as unclear departmental policy regarding assessment and teacher assessment literacy etc.

The second part of the questionnaire statements was related to students' expectations and perceptions regarding assessment tasks. More than half of the respondents expected Selected Response Questions (SRQs) whereas less than 50 students showed liking for Constructed Response Questions (CRQs). An evaluation of exam question papers reported from the same context (Umer, Zakaria, & Alshara, 2018) revealed that teachers seemed to be responding to students' expectations by including selected response questions (SRQs) in the final examinations. SRQs are detrimental in fostering higher order thinking skills. Cognitive skills such as analysis, synthesis, explanation and evaluation can only be assessed though valid CRQs, particularly in during-the-course-assessment as it allows
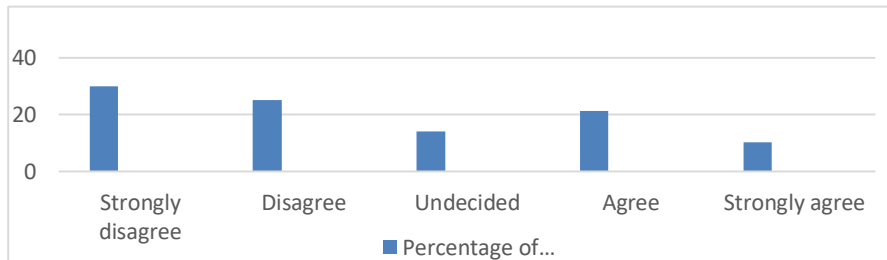
students to know their weaknesses and improve them through corrective feedback given by teachers.
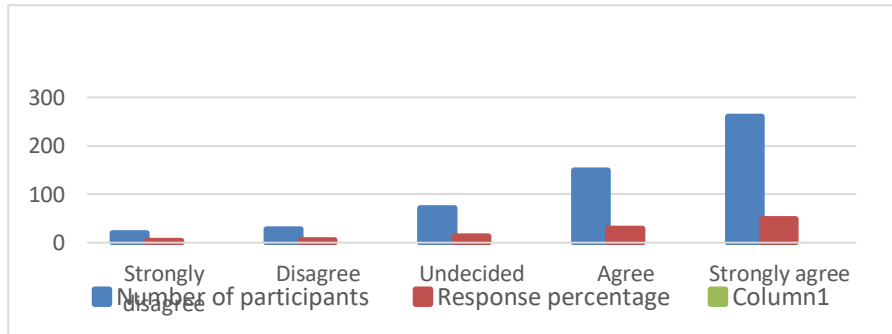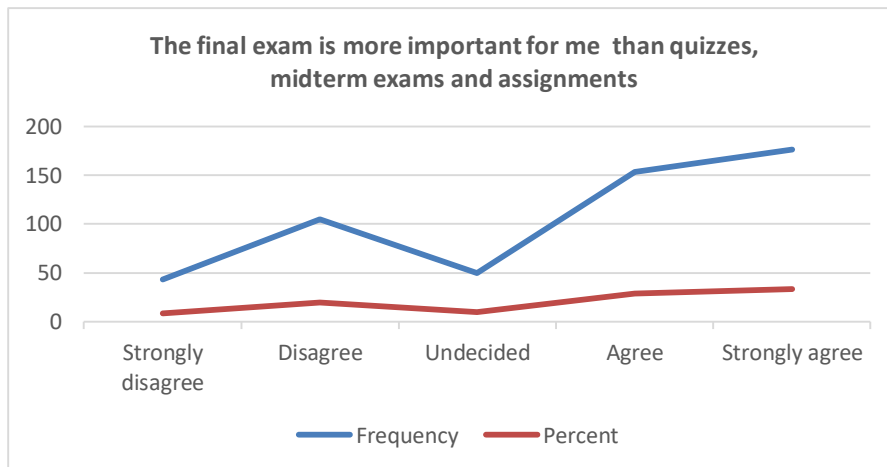

FIGURE-4
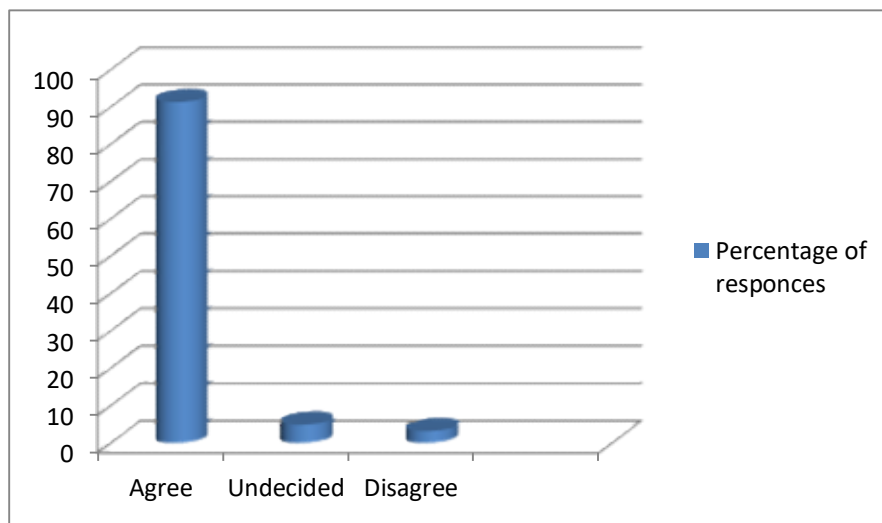**THE KIND OF ASSESSMENT TASKS THE LEARNERS EXPECTED**

FIGURE-5
THE LEARNERS' PREFERENCE FOR CONSTRUCTED-RESPONSE QUESTIONS

FIGURE-6
IMPORTANCE GIVEN TO THE FINAL EXAMS COMPARED
TO ITS FORMATIVE COUNTERPART

FIGURE-7
**I KNOW THE SPECIFIC PAGES AND PARAGRAPHS THAT WILL
COVER THE QUESTIONS OF QUIZZES AND MIDTERM EXAMS**

Another aspect of this part of the survey statements concerned what the learners studied for quizzes and midterm examinations. Almost all of the respondents agreed that they knew the specific pages and paragraphs that the formative assessment tasks would be based on. This finding resonated in the interview data where all the respondents unanimously stated that they knew the topics to be covered in the midterm examinations ahead. Therefore, they memorized the expected topics for the examinations. In addition, the participants had consensus on the point that they had a clear idea about the specific questions that could be asked in the midterm examinations. One of them said, 'We know the specific pages of the course book to be given in the midterm exam. In midterm exam, the teacher gave us a listening task with five questions and a writing task from the book and we knew the pages where the writing exam was supposed to be given from. So we memorized those pages. Also, we had practiced the listening task prior to the midterm exam' (Student M, Year Two, GPA 3.48).

Another student gave a detailed explanation of the nature and procedure of midterm examination of one of his teachers. He stated, 'Before midterm exam he [the teacher] gave us 19 points. Every point was explained in one or two lines. In the midterm exam, he gave us 20

true and false questions out of those nineteen points. Most of teachers give us true/false questions in midterm exams'. (Student V, Year Four, GPA 3.40). Regarding the nature of questions in midterm examinations, some of the students were of the opinion that all teachers did not give only true/false questions. They stated that some teachers also included essay type questions in midterm examinations. Nonetheless, one of the participants criticized the nature of the subjective questions and other participants agreed with his point. He commented: 'Subjective questions should need our experience, views and understanding not memorization. We get subjective questions in midterm exams or quizzes but we only write one page in total, not more than four paragraphs altogether though its' a 20-marks exam. Usually there're two to four questions in every midterm exam. And I write about three memorized sentences for each question. So it's not subjective examination' (Student T, fourth year, GPA 3.60).

Formative assessment without constructive feedback does not serve any purpose. It is imperative for formative assessment to improve students learning which is possible through feedback only (Black & William, 1998 a&b). When asked about feedback element, most of the participants stated that they did not think of discussion with their teachers regarding their graded work. The reason for this situation was given by one of the interview participants who said and three other members of the group agreed with him that some of the teachers didn't like discussion about grades. He further elaborated that some of the teachers' behaviour wasn't good. However, one of the students remarked that he liked to discuss his graded assignments with teachers because in that way he could ask the concerned teacher to raise his grades. The rest of the participants (N#15) agreed that they had no intension of even looking at any of their graded assignments let alone discussing it. A senior student portrayed student-teacher level of communication in the following words: 'The education system in this university is very traditional and useless. We only listen without producing anything. We can't speak. We can't interact with professors. We have very little speaking time during lessons. This will affect us in the future. We are about to graduate but for coming students it should be changed. Concerning the research assignments, a majority of the interview participants stated that teachers graded their assignments without reading them. One of them said that "the teachers only wanted

to see if a student has submitted the assignment or not". However, some of the students were also uninterested in following up their works with teachers or knowing their weaknesses in the anticipation of teachers' uncooperative behavior.

DISCUSSION

Put together, the survey and interview data confirm that formative assessment practices in the context of this study have a strong negative washback on what the learners learn, how they learn it and the depth of their learning. Both the survey and interview data show that students studied a very limited amount of content because they knew what the assessment tasks would cover. They only copied content for their research assignments from the internet. For midterm exams and quizzes, they knew in advance the specific topics to be given in tests. This finding raises serious questions about the validity and reliability of formative assessment in the context of this research. This finding confirms the results of previous research i.e., how test affected learning materials negatively by narrowing down the scope of learning materials (Ferman, 2004).

Munoz and Alvarez (2010) have remarked that one of the disadvantages of weak assessment tasks is that it tends to force learners to resort to the memorization of already taught materials which makes it hard for teachers to decide whether learners have actually understood the concepts. Tsagari (2009) also found that learners' learning styles are affected by the way they are assessed. The findings of this research indicate a heavy reliance on memorization as a main learning strategy which is considered an undesirable effect of assessment tasks.

The third research question this study sought answers for was how formative assessment influenced the depth of students' learning. Previous research strongly suggests that assessment methods and practices affect the depth of students' learning (Alderson and Wall, 1993). For example, performance-based assessment results in better learning (Stecher, Chun, and Barron, 2004) and authentic assessment help learners produce new knowledge (Archbald and Newmann, 1998). The results of this study revealed that students memorized materials mainly without understanding the content at times lending support to the findings of previous studies that memorization as a learning strategy result in lower order learning (Gijbels, and Dochy,

2006 and Gijbles, Segers, and Struyf, 2008). For example, in the research assignments section of the survey, the students confessed that they mostly copied the content from the internet and passed tests. The assessment methods seem to be clearly responsible for this surface level learning strategies employed by the learners (Gijbels, and Dochy, 2006).

Another issue pointed to by the interview respondents was inconsistency in administering the formative assessment tool i.e. quizzes. More than half of the interview participants agreed that only some teachers always gave quizzes and others did not. One of the participants said: 'I am studying nine courses this semester like most of my friends. We have not been given quizzes in all courses. For example, the class that we attended right now, we have been given no quiz though we are at the end of the semester.' This finding indicates the issues of assessment literacy and blurred institutional approach to the assessment of learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

Washback is a holistic phenomenon for which to occur there has to be favorable environment across the broad in an educational context under which an assessment scheme is operational. In the light of this research it is hard to determine if assessment is an independent variable solely responsible for what students learn, how they learn it and the depth of their learning. It appears to be dependent on other variables for the kind of impact it has on learning. Therefore, for making assessment have positive washback on learning teaching practitioners will have to change themselves and their students and an environment conducive for change must be adopted. For 'the teaching context, school environment, messages from the administration, and expectations of other teachers facilitate or detract from the possibility of change' (Cheng, 1997:269). Researchers even broaden the list of the variables affecting assessment by including 'textbook writers and publishers, teachers, students, schools, parents, local educational systems and local society' (Tsagari, 2009:8). The findings confirm the notion that to make assessment influence students' learning positively there has to be conscious efforts in every stage of assessment processes otherwise negative washback is guaranteed. Assessment tasks both formative and summative should be in alignment with

course learning outcomes; they must go through moderation for validity check and reliable marking.

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APPENDIX-A

**THE EFFECTS OF FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT
ON LEARNING STRATEGIES**

Formative Assessment (FA) e.g., quizzes, mid-term exams and assignments given to students during a course are helpful tools for students to check and improve their performance as they progress on their course/s. This study investigates Saudi undergraduates' views about FA and to determine how it affects students learning.

Read each question carefully and then tick only one of the boxes that suits you.

Q.2 Are you male or female? Male: [ ]   Female: [ ]

Q.3 Which year are you studying in?

Year 1		Year 2		Year 3		Year 4	
Semester 1	Semester 2	Semester 3	Semester 4	Semester 5	Semester 6	Semester 7	Semester 8

Q.4 What is your GPA (average grade)?

Below 1.00	Below 1.50	Below 2.00	Below 2.50	Below 3.00	Below 3.50	Below 4.00

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Disagree
1	I study several pages of a single course book to prepare my assignments.					
2	I copy the content of my assignments from the internet or my course book.					
3	If the content of my assignment is plagiarized, I fail it.					
4	I expect the kind of assessment tasks given in exams.					
5	I prefer constructed-response questions.					

6	The final exams are more important compared to its formative counterparts.					
7	I know the specific pages and paragraphs that will cover the questions of quizzes, midterm exams and final exams.					
8	I have to study several sources or books to prepare my assignments.					
9	I study multiple sources—books, websites and research journals etc.—for writing my assignments.					
10	I memorize the content for quizzes and midterm exams even if I do not understand it.					
11	I mention the sources where I quote any text from e.g. book or journal, in my assignments.					
12	I always include references at the end of my assignments.					
13	I memorize the content for quizzes and midterm exams even if I do not understand it.					
14	I expect quizzes and mid-term exams to include true/false and multiple -choice questions.					

15	If I memorize some content from my course book and write it in quizzes and mid-term exam I get good grades.					
16	If I write the answers in my own words in quizzes and mid-term exams I will lose grades.					

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