



THE WASHBACK EFFECT OF THE MOROCCAN ENGLISH BACCALAUREATE EXAMINATION ON TEACHING PRACTICES

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Abstract:

This study investigated the possible influence of the Moroccan English baccalaureate examination on what and how teachers teach in class. This study was carried out in the city of Fes, Morocco, where classroom observations were conducted in three high schools. These were followed by post-observation interviews and a structured questionnaire. The findings indicated that teachers' choice of teaching materials, the content of their course, and their teaching methodology were affected by the examination. However, the teachers in the study revealed that they were subjected to different degrees of influence. Some teachers thought that it was necessary to adopt exam-oriented activities to meet the demands of the examinations, whereas others were aware of the limitations associated with concentrating on examination preparation and thus were not affected by it to a great extent. Based on those results, it was recommended that any reform of teaching materials or teaching methodology has to go hand in hand with a reform of the format and content of the English baccalaureate examination.

Keywords: washback, Moroccan English baccalaureate examination, teaching methodology

1. Introduction

Examinations are taken to be highly ritualized practices in all societies because of their prominent role in shaping the lives of individuals. Bearing in mind that examinations can be used for a large array of purposes other than measurement, they are described as a 'normalizing gaze' or a 'surveillance system' that can qualify, classify, and punish the examinees by forcing them to abide by particular behaviors (i.e., examination

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preparation), and as an 'encroaching power' because of their ability to stimulate several controversial practices wherever they operate (Foucault, 1975; Latham, 1877).

In language teaching and learning, the presence of an examination might cause a form of bias in the educational system (Frederiksen, 1981). For students, the consequences associated with not passing or reaching a particular cutoff score drive most of them to value and fear examination and devalue other aspects of learning and schooling, and thus shift their emphasis to "*is this going to be on the test?*" (Marchant, 2004). For teachers, the presence of an examination affects how and what they teach in the sense that they might tend to narrow the scope of their courses to that which is tested and use teaching materials that resemble the format of the test (Marchant, 2004). In the body of the literature about language testing and assessment, the way the examination influences language teaching and learning is referred to as *washback*.

It was not until the early 1990s that discussions regarding the washback effect began to appear in the field of language testing and assessment (Green, 2013; Wall, 2012). In particular, Alderson and Wall (1993) are credited for having recognized washback as a distinct and emerging area of research in language testing, and provided the first critical analysis of the notion of washback in an article entitled '*Does washback exist?*' (Cheng, 2008; Wall, 2012). As the title indicates, Alderson and Wall (1993) tried to question the existence of washback on various grounds. They explain that washback, if it does exist, is likely to be a complex phenomenon and that even with all the statements acknowledging the existence of some sort of relationship between the examination and the educational system, the existence of such a relationship was, at this stage, still unproved. Using Andrews' (1994, p. 67) words, "*washback is long on assertion but short on empirical study*".

In 1993, Hughes suggested the first theoretical model of washback. He provided a tripartite distinction regarding the washback effect, which involves three main elements: participants, processes, and products. Participants include language learners and teachers, administrators, materials developers, and publishers. Processes cover all the actions that the participants take, whereas products refer to what is learned and the quality of learning (Hughes, 1993, cited in Bailey, 1999).

As more research is conducted, several educational practices, once regarded as typical, are being recognized as a product of washback. Similarly, the English Baccalaureate examination (EBE, henceforth), which is a final achievement test administered by the Moroccan Ministry of Education and taken annually by thousands of Moroccan students at the end of their secondary education, holds the same state of affairs considering its weight in Moroccan society. Investigating the washback phenomenon in Morocco is not only necessary for the sake of proving the existence of washback, but also for the sake of determining whether the practice of high-stakes testing in this context produces beneficial or detrimental consequences and whether the quality of language education is affected by these consequences. This paper, therefore, describes the way the EBE influences EFL Moroccan teachers. The specific aspects under investigation are teachers' choice of content, materials, and teaching methods.

Considering the purpose of the study, the following research questions are formulated:

1. Is there any difference between teaching practices in examination classes and non-examination classes that can be attributed to the washback effect of the EBE?
2. How does the EBE affect teachers' choice of content and teaching materials?
3. How does the EBE affect teachers' choice of methods for grammar and vocabulary instruction?
4. What is the washback value of the EBE?

The present paper is organized into four sections. After the introduction, the second section is devoted to describing the population in the study, the research instruments that were used, namely the questionnaire, the interviews, and the classroom observations, as well as the particular procedures in which these instruments were deployed. The third section, on the other hand, presents the detailed results of the study. The paper ends with a general discussion of those results and concludes that any future reform of the EFL practices in Morocco has to take into consideration the possible impacts of the EBE format and contents on teaching practices in the classroom.

2. Method

The methodology adopted in this study aims, first, to provide evidence for the existence of washback in the investigated context and, second, to describe how it is exactly manifested as it is observed. The empirical part of this study was conducted inside high schools in Fes. Watanabe (2004) emphasizes that washback on a general dimension addresses the question of "Would teaching/learning become different if there were no exams?" Accordingly, this study is based on a mixed methodology approach that seeks to compare and contrast teaching practices in **examination** classes and **non-examination classes** taught by the same set of teachers. Three research tools were used in this study: classroom observations, post-observation interviews, and a questionnaire for high-school teachers.

2.1 Participants

A total of 50 high school teachers took part in this study. The process of selecting these participants was done through homogeneous sampling. The number of female participants is equal to the number of male participants. Nevertheless, in the amount of research about washback, gender was not classified as a factor that can mediate the washback effect. Figure 1 below summarizes the demographic information of the participants.

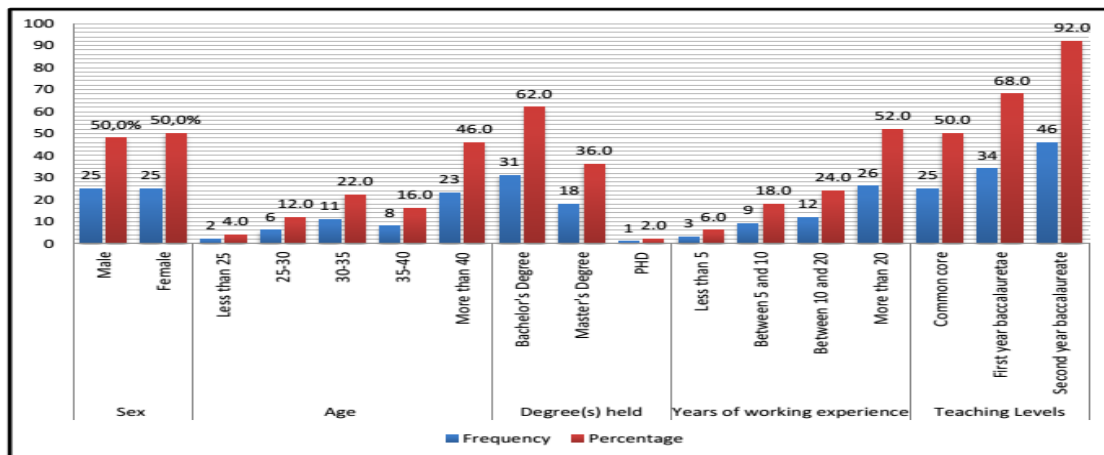


Figure 1: Teachers' profiles

2.2 Instruments

Classroom observation instruments included observation checklists and note-taking sheets. Checklists were used to record the frequency of occurrence of several teaching behaviors inside the classroom. The aim behind using those checklists was first to decide which behaviors could potentially be observed and how these behaviors would be recorded. In order to limit the scope of the observation, the behaviors that were chosen were mainly related to grammar and vocabulary instruction. These behaviors were then divided into two main categories: behaviors related to positive washback, and behaviors related to negative washback. Three attributes were used to record the occurrence or not of a given instance of behavior: *not observed*, *observed sometimes*, and *observed frequently*. The timing of recording was approximately the same in each of the observed lessons and did not exceed 20 minutes. Note-taking sheets consisted of broad categories: teacher's behavior, student's behavior, teacher-student interaction, the content on the board, the method(s) of teaching, the materials used, and the content of the course. In each category, field notes were taken in the form of narrative descriptions followed by the researcher's comments.

Prior to classroom observations, semi-open interviews were conducted with the teacher. Each interview started with specific core questions, which were determined in advance. Depending on how each interview proceeded, the interviewer branched off to ask other probing questions and demanded that the interviewee gave more clarifications about specific answers.

Despite the importance of direct observations of the situation where an examination is used, employing other research methods, including interviews and questionnaires, is just as important to find out about teachers' intentions behind classroom behavior and activities (Watanabe, 2004b). With this in mind, the researcher opted for a structured questionnaire that was comprised of four sections. Some items of the questionnaire were developed based on the research questions, whereas other items were adopted with slight modifications from two main studies: Loumbourdi (2013) and Cheng (2004).

2.3 Procedure

At the outset of the study, a total of 21 high school classes were observed for over two weeks. In each high school, the researcher attended several classes that were taught by three different teachers. The researcher planned to conduct classroom observations in examination classes and non-examination classes that are taught by the same teacher. However, it was found that some teachers were assigned one level only, and thus it was not possible to include them in the comparison. The lessons observed were mainly related to grammar and vocabulary skills. Out of nine teachers, the researcher was able to conduct interviews with six teachers only. Four interviews were audio-recorded, whereas, due to the interviewees' unwillingness to be audio-taped, two interviews were recorded in the form of comments.

In addition to the three high schools where classroom observations were carried out, questionnaires were distributed to teachers from other high schools in Fes. The questionnaires were collected from teachers a day or two after their administration, while, in some high schools, they were left by the teachers at the institution's administration for three or four days before they were collected. The administration of the questionnaire also included other institutions, particularly the faculty of arts and humanities and the American Language Center, where the researcher was able to get easy access to master-degree students and assistant teachers who were also working as full-time high-school teachers.

3. Results

3.1 Classroom observations

3.1.1 Non-examination classes

As far as non-examination classes are concerned, the findings of the checklists have disclosed two main facts. First, behaviors that are related to test format or content, test-taking strategies, and test-like activities were not observed. Second, the behaviors that are more frequently observed can be classified as desirable teaching practices. All the observed teachers showed a preference for teaching tasks and activities that are communicative and more engaging for the learner. Teachers were faithful to the direct approach in the sense that teaching was done entirely in the target language, and the learners were not allowed to use their mother tongue at all, except for one teacher who was using Moroccan Arabic in addition to French when necessary. On the whole, the emphasis was on students' use of the English language, rather than their knowledge about the language. The teaching of lexical and grammatical items was mostly done through communicative tasks, free production tasks, and speaking activities.

3.1.2 Examination classes

As it was predicted, the behaviors and classroom activities observed were certainly influenced by the examination, with various instances of positive and negative washback. Examples of positive washback include the use of English mainly as a language of

instruction, which was observed with eight teachers. The use of communication-oriented tasks is also apparent, such as consciousness-raising tasks as observed with six teachers, free-production tasks with four teachers, and communicative tasks with four teachers as well. In terms of negative washback, five teachers were using decontextualized teaching practices, four teachers were emphasizing the written form of language only with no feedback on students' pronunciation mistakes, and three teachers were overusing the mother tongue.

What can also be noted in the observed classes is the use of teaching practices that are exam-oriented. Two teachers made use of test-like activities that resembled the format of the examination, whereas one teacher devoted the lesson to training the students on test-taking strategies and how to deal with the question types that are included in the examination. Although the remaining teachers did not employ similar activities, they occasionally referred to the examination. Three teachers were informing their students about test-taking strategies and how to use the grammatical structure or the vocabulary items they learnt the day of the examination. Likewise, the lessons of four teachers were intermitted with information about test format and content.

3.2 Post-observation interviews

When asked whether EBE affected their teaching practices, all interviewees responded with high agreement. Some teachers claimed this influence was realized in the training that students needed to go through since they had to become familiar with the types of questions that were presented in the examination, whereas others attributed this influence to the pressure that was put on teachers who were expected to cover ten units in examination classes within a tight period.

Concerning their use of teaching methods in examination classes and non-examination classes, teachers' comments were as varied as the findings of classroom observations. Some teachers asserted that they were faithful to their method of teaching regardless of what level they were dealing with. In contrast, other teachers confirmed using different instructional methods depending on what level they were teaching, claiming that examination classes require test-oriented methods and frequent use of the mother tongue.

Regarding students' interaction and oral communication in both classes, the teachers expressed different opinions. One teacher acknowledged that she did not neglect interaction in the classroom and that her students were always engaged in speaking activities in addition to practicing the written form of language, whereas two teachers suggested that they put more emphasis on written language rather than oral communication in examination classes because their students concentrated more on comprehension, grammar, vocabulary, and writing.

Regarding their thoughts about the content and format of EBE, all teachers expressed negative attitudes and discouraged opinions about the way the examination was designed. Although the examination appeared to be comprehensive for teachers, they noted that it was high time its format changed because students were getting bored

with it, and that, despite its difficulty, the examination should also include an oral component that would give equal and fair opportunities to students.

3.3 The questionnaire

3.3.1 Teachers' perceptions about EFL and EBE

This section aimed to inquire about teachers' perceptions of teaching and whether they were shaped by the presence of the examination. Teachers were asked first to choose from three options representing their main concern when teaching examination classes (second-year baccalaureate students): students' knowledge about the English language, students' use of the English language, or students' examination preparation:

Table 1: Item 1: What is your main concern when teaching second-year baccalaureate students?

	Frequency	Percentage
Students' knowledge of the English language	14	28,0
Students' use of the English language	30	60,0
Students' examination preparation	34	68,0

As shown above, in Table 1, students' examination preparation received the highest rating from 68 % of the respondents, followed by students' use of the English language, chosen by 60 % of the respondents, whereas students' knowledge of the English language received the lowest rating.

For the following two questions, teachers were required to use a five-item *Likert scale* ranging from 'definitely yes' to 'not at all' to distinguish between the types of activities they think were important to promote language learning and the types of activities they perceived as being more helpful to prepare students for the examination.

Table 2: Item 2: What types of activities/materials do you think are important to promote language learning?

	Communicative tasks	Language games	Role-play and group discussion	Authentic material	Textbook activities	Test-like activities
Definitely yes	80.0	16.0	38.0	52.0	18.0	16,0
To a large extent	12.0	30,0	38.0	26.0	28.0	32,0
To some extent	6.0	40.0	22.0	16.0	38.0	34,0
To a slight extent	2.0	14.0	2.0	4.0	14.0	14,0
Not at all					2.0	2,0

Table 3: Item 3: What types of activities/materials do you think are important to prepare for the examination?

	Communicative tasks	Language games	Role play and group discussion	Authentic material	Textbook activities	Test-like activities
Definitely yes	32.0	10.0	16.0	40.0	38.0	66.0
To a large extent	14.0	10.0	12.0	20.0	28.0	26.0
To some extent	28.0	22.0	34.0	20.0	16.0	2.0
To a slight extent	16.0	32.0	20.0	6.0	10.0	4.0
Not at all	6.0	18.0	10.0	8.0	2.0	

A comparison between Tables 2 and 3 Shows that the vast majority of the respondents (80%) thought that communicative tasks were effective for the sake of promoting language learning, whereas, about examination preparation, 66 % of the participants favored the use of test-like activities. Surprisingly, it must be noted that 32% of the participants thought that test-like activities were important to a large extent for promoting language learning, while another 34% thought that they were important to some extent. Language games, along with role play and group discussion, were thought of as being more effective for language learning but not for examination preparation. On the other hand, there was no statistically significant difference concerning the rating of authentic materials. As far as textbook activities are concerned, the participants believed that they could provide more assistance for examination preparation (38% definitely yes; 28% to a large extent).

Table 4: Item 4: What are the factors that influence your teaching the most?

	Professional training	Teaching experience and beliefs	Baccalaureate examination	Prescribed syllabus	People's expectations	Textbook
Definitely yes	64.0	72.0	24.0	22.0	10.0	18.0
To a large extent	12.0	20.0	30.0	36.0	14.0	24.0
To some extent	12.0	6.0	24.0	26.0	26.0	32.0
To a slight extent	2.0		12.0	8.0	26.0	20.0
Not at all	2.0	2.0	4.0	4.0	20.0	4.0

The last part of this section addresses the factors that affect teaching. The results in Table 4 proved that teachers were more influenced by individual factors that were related to their professional training and teaching experience. It was observed that teachers

expressed different degrees of influence about the influence of other people's expectations and the textbook on their teaching, while 20% denied being affected by what other people think of their teaching performance. It is worth noting that only 24% of the respondents admitted being influenced by the baccalaureate examination, while 30% of them admitted being influenced to a large extent. It seems evident that the examination was not widely recognized as an affecting factor by all teachers, which appears to contradict the results obtained from the first item where 68% of the teachers chose students' examination preparation as their main concern.

3.3.2 Teaching content, materials, and methodology

This section starts with a two-point question in which teachers were asked if they devoted some time to the teaching of the contents and skills not included in the examination. As can be observed in Table 5 below, although the baccalaureate examination is not comprehensive in the sense that only reading and writing skills are tested, the absolute majority reported that they made room for content that is not tested, and thus their practices did not suffer any examination washback effect.

Table 5: Item 1: Do you devote some time to the teaching of the skills and contents not included in the baccalaureate exam?

	Percentage	Frequency
Yes	82,0	41
No	16,0	8

The next items were designed using ranking questions on a scale ranging from 1= the most important, to 4= the least important. Teachers were asked to rank four aspects of content organization in their order of importance.

Table 6: Item 3: Which of the following components do you give much importance in second-year baccalaureate classes?

	Reading Comprehension	Grammar/ Vocabulary	Writing	Speaking and Listening
First-ranked	28.0	58.0	4.0	6,0
Second-ranked	50.0	16.0	10.0	8,0
Third-ranked	16.0	4.0	52.0	10,0
Fourth-ranked		6.0	16.0	62,0

As can be observed in Table 6, grammar and vocabulary were ranked first, followed by reading and comprehension. Improving grammar and vocabulary skills seems to be more important for teachers than reading and comprehension skills because the former are more difficult to improve and need more time. Writing was ranked third because students' writing ability depends on how successful they have been in acquiring grammatical rules and vocabulary items.

To find out about the influence of the examination on teachers' choice of materials, teachers were asked if they made use of exam-related materials in second-year baccalaureate classes.

Table 7: Item 4: Do you make use of exam-related materials in second-year baccalaureate classes?

	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	49	98,0
No	1	2,0

The results in Table 7 are statistically significant in the sense that the vast majority (98%) confirmed making use of exam-related materials in examination classes. Subsequently, when asked about what type of exam-related materials they were using in particular, the participants reported the following:

Table 8: Item 5: If so, what kind of materials do you use in those classes?

	Textbook	Self-made materials	Parallel materials	Exam papers
Percentage	50.0	80.0	50.0	76.0
Frequency	25	40	25	38

Table 8 suggests that teachers relied more heavily on back issues of exam papers and self-made materials. It seems that teachers favored using previous exam papers over parallel materials that resemble the format of the examination because they wanted their students to undergo the same experience and bear the same conditions that they would eventually find themselves facing on the day of the examination.

The last item of the questionnaire was designed to examine the washback value of the examination. Participants were provided with several statements which illustrate examples of positive and negative washback. Table 9 below shows the extent to which the participants agree with those statements:

Table 9: Item 4: To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

	Changing the format and content of the examination would improve my teaching	The examination creates positive motivation for my students	Students' language skills are promoted by preparing for the examination	Students' success in the examination is a good indication of their language abilities	To prepare for the examination, it is necessary to put more emphasis on reading and writing skills	To prepare for the examination, it is necessary to neglect speaking and listening skills
Strongly Agree	26.0	10.0	14.0	6.0	32.0	8,0
Agree	60.0	42.0	36.0	30.0	42.0	4,0
Neutral	4.0	16.0	14.0	16.0	4.0	18,0
Disagree	6.0	18.0	26.0	22.0	18.0	44,0
Strongly Disagree		12.0	8.0	22.0	2.0	24,0

About the first statement, the majority of the participants agreed with the fact that changing the format and content of the examination would improve their teaching. As far as students were concerned, only half of the participants (10% strongly agreed and 42% agreed) indicated that the examination created positive motivation for their students. Teachers did not show much agreement with the third and fourth statements which stated that students' language skills were promoted by preparing for the examination and that their success in the examination was a good indication of their language abilities. Concerning the last statement, although it is true that preparing for the examination requires putting more emphasis on reading and writing skills, 68 % of participants (44% disagreed and 24 strongly disagreed) although this does not necessarily mean neglecting speaking and listening skills.

4. Discussion

The findings obtained from classroom observations revealed that teaching practices in examination classes and non-examination classes were at variance. This discrepancy can be attributed to the washback effect of the examination. However, it needs to be noted that this effect was different in terms of intensity. With some teachers, washback was strong as it was realized in their overuse of drilling activities and explanations in the mother tongue. With others, washback was weak and it affected only their choice of content and teaching materials. Washback was mediated by teachers' factors and their teaching philosophy in the sense that they were aware of the limitations associated with the focus on examination preparation, and instead, they tried to target students' linguistic as well as communicative competence.

In terms of content, although teachers were mindful of the fact that the baccalaureate examination is limited to reading and writing skills, their responses to some items of the questionnaire indicated that they also understood the importance of including speaking and listening skills. However, what was observed inside some classrooms, coupled with the findings of item 3 from the questionnaire, supported Frederiksen's (1981) theory of test bias, since some teachers introduced bias against teaching what the test does not measure. In terms of materials, the examination made teachers stick to the textbook even though they believed it needed to be changed or modified. Second, teachers' use of exam-related materials can be described as a common case of washback that has been reported in several studies because teachers tend to familiarize their students with the examination using materials that resemble its structure and format. In terms of the methodology of instruction, the examination did not affect how teachers thought language should be learnt, but it had more influence on the way their learners approached learning. Sometimes, teachers were unable to change this reality and hence ended up involuntarily following the same path as their students by cramming for the test.

Still, the results of the study are not statistically significant to say that all three aspects (i.e.: content, materials, and methods) were equally affected by the examination. From her research findings concerning the impact of three national language tests on teaching and learning, Shohamy (1993) concluded that the strength of the impact varies depending on external variables that were related to the stakes carried by the examination and the relevance of the subject to decision-makers and the public at large. In this study, it was found that the strength of the impact varied depending on internal variables that were related to the teachers themselves, as well as on what kind of element was being affected. In other words, some teachers were affected in terms of content and materials, but not at the level of their teaching methodology. On the other hand, others might have been adopting test-oriented teaching methodologies, but they were not limited to the content included in the examination.

Concerning the washback value of the EBE, the findings proved that washback was bound to be a complex phenomenon, and thus, it was impossible to find entirely

negative or positive washback in each of the observed courses. On the one hand, teachers' responses to the last item of the questionnaire indicated that they were not completely satisfied with the format and content of the examination. Teachers appeared to be confident about the positive washback effect that could be achieved if the examination was changed because they found it difficult to make a compromise between activities involved in learning the language and activities involved in preparing for the test. As some teachers advocated in post-observation interviews, students' test scores might improve, but this does not necessarily mean that their ability to use the languages improves as well. On the other hand, teachers appeared to be in favor of the examination because it invoked learning, and thus motivation could be considered the primary aspect of EBE positive washback since it pushes students to work harder.

5. Conclusion

The current study succeeded in proving the existence of washback in the Moroccan EFL context and contributed to the scarce literature on language testing in Morocco. Several recommendations can be drawn from the obtained findings. For test developers, it is recommended that the content of the examination should be reviewed in light of the course objectives and the pedagogical guidelines for language instruction in Moroccan high schools. Any points of variance between the two elements should be reconsidered as a possible source of negative washback. In addition, adopting a form of direct and authentic assessment might stimulate high-school teachers to use more innovative and creative teaching practices inside their classrooms. About the skills being tested, introducing a speaking component in the examination will undoubtedly encourage teachers to care more about students' oral proficiency. For future research, it would be of value to investigate washback as it is experienced by students. As was realized in some of their comments, teachers were disturbed by the way their students overestimated the role of the examination. This instance of negative washback should thus be taken into consideration by future researchers who are invited to include language learners in their investigation and to address further dimensions of washback. However, unless teachers and students are willing to change their perceptions about the use of language assessment and be mindful of the fact that tests and examinations can have a backward effect on their teaching and learning, the efforts of test developers and researchers will not be of much value.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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