

# **A Qualitative Study of Washback Effects of New Iranian TEFL Ph.D. Program Entrance Exam on Applicants' Study Plans and Strategies: Insights From Instructors and Applicants**

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## **Abstract**

The newly administered Iranian Ph.D. Program Entrance Exam (PPEE) is supposed to have had different washback effects on university curriculums. This qualitative study examined the effects of the new TEFL PPEE on the applicants' study plans and strategies from the points of view of both Iranian university instructors and applicants. To this end, we conducted in-depth interviews with 10 experienced TEFL instructors from 4 different Iranian universities along with 10 applicants who sat both the old and new entrance exams. Findings indicated that from the points of view of both instructors and applicants, the new exam has generated confusion in terms of technical content covered. It was also revealed that it has been more bits-and-pieces-oriented. The new exam, in the instructors' view, has induced the applicants to develop exam-oriented strategies, rather than more demanding cognitive skills as required by target program courses.

**Keywords:** Washback; TEFL Ph.D. Program Entrance Exam (PPEE); University Admission Tests; Study Plans and Strategies

## **1. Introduction**

In some countries such as Iran, where students have to sit University Admission Tests (UAT) to get into universities, UATs might affect learners and teachers significantly (Salehi & Yunus, 2012), especially when it comes to filtering applicants for higher studies because of noticeable limitations in admission of students in universities as well as the great role such tests can play in determining the academic careers and social lives of students. Earning a doctoral degree in education, acting as a gatekeeper to procuring a prestigious career like the job of a university instructor, could be considered as a decisive goal in Iranian university students' lives. This has raised the sensitivity and significance of Ph.D. programs and consequently has brought about annual tsunami of M.A. students aspiring to enter the highest education. The number of applicants, more specifically, who sat the Ph.D. Program Entrance Exam (PPEE) for governmental universities in 2013 was a record of more than 216,000 applicants (Sanjesh, 2013).

The Iranian PPEE used to be administered in its old form until 2012 when the Iranian Ministry of Education decided to change its policies regarding planning and administration procedures. The old PPEEs were planned and administered by Iranian universities themselves admitting Ph.D. students based on their own educational policies and plans. Each university used to determine the number of Ph.D. students they could admit and to charge their most experienced and qualified teachers with developing proper entrance exams typically involving essay type questions. The applicants sitting the old TEFL PPEE were required to provide long and elaborate answers to exam items and had only the chance to get admission into the university whose exam they sat. However, the decision made by the Iranian Ministry of Education to put an end to the old PPEE's dominance in favor of designing new exams generated a new path for applicants, M.A. university instructors, and other parties of interest to follow. The new exam was developed with three main goals to achieve: (1) to administer educational justice, (2) to reduce extravagant costs for sitting the PPEEs, and (3) to admit qualified Ph.D. students from all around the country (ISNA, 2012). The new exam has been nationalized and standardized. In other words, it is uniformly developed by Sanjesh Organization, a subsidiary of Iranian Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology, and is administered in national scope. Moreover, in contrast to the old tests which included essay type questions, the new exams are developed in multiple choice formats.

Much care irrefutably has been taken by the new exam developers to ensure that the new PPEE is adequately qualified to assess the technical and general competency of the applicants. Nevertheless, assessment is not generally the only function testing can have, but rather it can bring both language learners and teachers under a set of both negative and positive impacts (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). The effect of a test on teaching and often on learning is broadly defined as washback effect (Green, 2007), which has been the subject to research by many researchers in recent years (e.g. Ghoorchaei, Tavakoli, & Nejad Ansari, 2010; Green, 2007; Jin, 2006; Luxia, 2007). Washback is also understood to be the effects that tests have on students in terms of the methods they use to study an L2 (Pan & Newfields, 2012).

Language learners may employ varying plans and strategies to study when they are to sit different tests (Pan & Newfields, 2012) even if they aspire to accomplish the same goals assessing similar set of knowledge components and skills. Likewise, although both the old and new forms of TEFL PPEE have been supposed to serve the same functions, administration of the test in its new form might variously bring new impacts on applicants. The present study aimed to examine the effects of the new TEFL PPEE on the applicants' study plans and strategies from the point of view of both Iranian university instructors and applicants. What we mean by the applicants' *study plans* in this study is the general

framework they map out to study for the PPEE incorporating their area of concentration as well as the requisite materials and technical contents to be covered. Meanwhile, the critical approaches and study techniques to which the applicants resort in order to effectively tackle the process of organizing and taking in the essential technical contents are referred to as *study strategies*.

## 2. Literature Review

The concept of *washback* is prevalent in language teaching and testing literature as well as general education. Wall and Anderson (1993) define it as “the way that tests are . . . perceived to influence classroom practices, and syllabus and curriculum planning” (p. 117). Buck (1988) defines it simply as the influence that tests exert on teaching and learning. Bachman and Palmer (1996) consider washback to be a feature of a wider process known as test impact. It is important to bear in mind that washback is a neutral term, which may refer to positive or intended (Bachman & Palmer, 1996) or to negative or unintended effects (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Hughes, 1989).

Various researchers (e.g., Cheng, 2005; Davies, 1990; Green, 2007; Hayes & Read, 2003, 2004; Wall & Horak, 2006) have conducted numerous studies on the effect of testing on teaching, and the findings, in general, indicated that teaching to the test is a common practice. Cheng (2005) and Green (2007), for instance, found test-related activities (e.g., offering test-taking tips, doing question analysis) and test-taking strategies instruction more prevalent in IELTS/TOEFL preparation classes than in regular classes. Chapelle and Brindley (2002) assert that the influence of a test often tends to be harmful for large-scale multiple choice proficiency exams due to the temptation for language learners to spend time on activities that will help them succeed in the exam rather than to develop insightful skills.

Despite the fact that the effects of tests on teaching have been hotly debated in a significant number of studies, little research has been conducted regarding the effects of tests on the learning processes (Pan & Newfields, 2012). Studies on the effect of testing on learners have scrutinized different aspects such as learners’ motivations, study times, and learning activities (e.g., Chu, 2009; Ferman, 2004; Gall et al., 2003; Gan et al., 2004; Jou, 2010; Shohamy et al., 1996; Stoneman, 2006) and have revealed varied and sometimes contradictory findings. In general, the literature review suggests that testing promotes learning but ensues a reduction of learners’ motivation for learning after the test administration (Shohamy et al., 1996), provokes learners to study more intensively if they are not sufficiently competent (Ferman, 2004), inspires them to prepare for the national and international exams (Stoneman, 2006), and noticeably affects the methods test applicants bring into service in order to prepare for a test (Chu, 2009; Jou, 2010).

Although a great number of studies have been conducted on the washback effect of the tests in different contexts, little attention has been given to the high-stakes university entrance exams (Salehi & Yunus, 2012). Researchers from Iran, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Israel, and Turkey have dealt with the English section of the university entrance exams in their own countries. Qi (2004) investigated the intended washback effect of the English section of the National Matriculation Test in China. The results of her study revealed that there was a noticeable discrepancy between what the test constructors intended and what the teachers and students practiced in schools, indicating the inefficiency of the test for bringing about pedagogical changes in Chinese schools. Cheng (2004) explored the washback effect of Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) change on the teachers and their classroom teaching behaviors in secondary schools. The researcher concluded that certain washback effects on teachers' attitudes towards the modified exam could be seen, although the teachers' teaching activities were not influenced by the exam reform. Likewise, Watanabe (2004) investigated the washback effects of the Japanese university entrance exam on classroom instruction and concluded that the entrance exam gave rise to the teachers' use of the exam preparation as an opportunity to improve the English learners' proficiency. In Iranian context, Salehi & Yunus (2012) investigated the washback effect of the Iranian University Entrance Exam (UEE) on the Iranian high school English teachers. The study findings indicated that the UEE negatively and implicitly influences English teachers to teach to the content and format of the test. Additionally, they found that little attention is given to three language skills of speaking, writing, and listening in the classroom as these skills are not tested in the UEE.

Review of the related literature in the present study indicates that the washback effects of high-stakes tests on learners/applicants and, in particular, their learning strategies and study plans have been underresearched. This is more acute when UATs are a concern. Owing to its scope, sensitivity, and recency, this study was an attempt to have the new Iranian TEFL PEE under investigation.

It seems that no remarkable study has been conducted in order to investigate washback effects of the new TEFL PEE on the applicants seeking to sit it. The incentive behind the present study is to examine whether and how the new exam has brought the applicants' study plans and strategies under influence from the view point of both applicants and university instructors.

### **3. Method**

Washback researchers suggest qualitative inquiries to analyze the washback effect of a given test (Cheng, 2004). The current study was a qualitative examination

of the washback of the new Iranian TEFL PPEE on the applicants' study plans and strategies.

### 3.1 Participants

The participants were 10 experienced Iranian instructors and 10 Iranian TEFL PPEE applicants. The first group of respondents included 10 university instructors currently teaching M.A. courses at four different Iranian universities, that is, Shiraz, Esfahan, Sheikhabaee, and Shahrekord Universities. The instructors had, at least, 4 years of teaching experience at universities and aged between 43 and 56. Of the instructors, three were females and seven were males. Table 1 shows the demographic information of the interviewed instructors.

Table 1. *Demographic Information of Interviewed TEFL M.A. Instructors*

No	Names*	Age	Gender	M.A. Teaching Experience	Current University
1	Mahnaz	48	Female	6 years	Shiraz University
2	Hossein	54	Male	13 years	Shiraz University
3	Hamed	46	Male	7 years	Shiraz University
4	Mehran	45	Male	7 years	Shiraz University
5	Nader	44	Male	4 years	Shahrekord University
6	Amin	43	Male	4 years	Shahrekord University
7	Javad	50	Male	9 years	University of Isfahan
8	Sara	48	Female	7 years	University of Isfahan
9	Salman	44	Male	5 years	Sheikhabaee University
10	Simin	45	Female	5 years	Sheikhabaee University

*Note:* The names are fictitious.

Once the instructors were interviewed, they were asked to introduce, if possible, any accessible applicants who had experienced sitting both the new and old TEFL PPEEs. The applicants accessed were then requested to introduce similar applicants. A total of 10 applicants (females = 6, males = 4) were accessed and interviewed. They were M.A. holders who graduated from different Iranian universities and sat both the old and new PPEEs. It was presumed that they were able to recall their experiences of both the new and old exams. Of the applicants nominated and accessed, four were in their twenties, and the rest were in their thirties. Table 2 illustrates the demographic information of the TEFL Ph.D. entrance exam applicants:

Table 2. *Demographic Information of Applicants*

No	Name*	Age	Gender	M.A. University
1	Ali	28	Male	Tabriz University
2	Hasan	29	Male	Shiraz University
3	Leila	31	Female	Shiraz University
4	Zahra	34	Female	Shiraz University
5	Mohsen	32	Male	Shiraz University
6	Narges	29	Female	University of Isfahan
7	Nahid	31	Female	University of Isfahan
8	Reza	27	Male	Shahrekord University
9	Razieh	35	Female	Ferdowsi University of Mashhad
10	Elham	30	Female	Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

*Note:* The names are fictitious.

### 3.2 Data Collection

To achieve the objectives of the study, an attempt was made to conduct in-depth interviews with the participants to elicit and examine their points of view about the ways the new test had affected the applicants' study plans and strategies. We employed open-ended interview questions in order to probe the issue in-depth and let the interviewees openly elaborate on their experience and reflections. The interview questions were developed and asked in English. However, the interviewees were given the opportunity to freely decide on the language they preferred to respond to the questions. It is worth mentioning that the interviews took 10 to 20 min and were recorded with the interviewees' permission. Once the data were collected, they were transcribed into written texts and then were prepared to be analyzed. Care was taken by the researchers in the data collection phase to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings. To this end, the researchers sought to avoid bias through using strategies to increase the trustworthiness in qualitative studies as recommended by McMillan and Schumacher (2006). More specifically, they employed a prolonged and persistent field-work and accounted for the participants' language verbatim accounts, that is, literal statements of the applicants were cautiously documented. When the responses were in Farsi, the statements were carefully rendered into English. In addition, the researchers frequently used member checking to check the data informally with the participants for accuracy during the interviews and searched for discrepant data that did not conform to the patterns.

### 3.3 Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were coded through constant comparative analysis as suggested by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The analysis involved a process of

repeated sifting through the data to distinguish similarities and patterns of reference in transcripts of the interviews. Analyses of these similarities and patterns gradually led to an evolving coding system for the categories. More specifically, during the process of the content analysis, the units of analysis and coding schemes were defined and developed; then the codes were transformed into categorical labels or themes that were repeated or appeared as patterns in the interviews. This procedure, according to Patton (2002), is intended to help the researchers in “developing some manageable classification or coding scheme” as “the first step of analysis” (p. 463). Data analysis proceeded incrementally and once the coherence and saturation of the data were accomplished, conclusions were drawn based on the analyzed data. Table 3 illustrates the major categories and coding schemes along with the thematic categorizations which emerged from data analysis.

Table 3. *Major Categories, Themes, and Coding Schemes*

The New Exam Washback on	Theme Code
Study Plans	Defectively dubious study plans T1 Memorizing details T2
Study Strategies	Studying at the level of comprehension T3 Intensive reading strategies T4 Exam oriented study strategies T5

## 4. Results

### 4.1 *Insights From Applicants*

As regards the questions which concerned the effect of the new exam on the applicants' study plans, data analysis of the applicants' responses revealed that the study plans they mapped out in the light of the new exam were defectively dubious. Six from among the 10 applicants pointed to generation of confusion in deciding on the technical contents to be covered in the new exam as the chief reason why the applicants build their study plans on insecure foundations. For instance, one of the applicants, Zahra, in this regard, contended that “when I was about to take the new exam, I was in darkness because nobody could tell me, then, what the main sources were to study.” Concerning the confusion among applicants as to what materials are essential to study, Leila also stated that:

- *After the Ph.D. exam nationalization, I found a new problem. I really did not know how to find a reliable source to nominate the important books and resources I had to study. I bought many new books and I really did not know which one was more important (respondent's words).*

Some of the applicants further put forward their ideas on the reasons why and how the new exam has generated bafflement among the applicants. One of the reasons cited by the applicants concerned the inaccessibility of the new test

developers as a first hand and reliable source of information on exam content, whereas “in the old Ph.D. entrance exams the teachers could ensure applicants about the books to study because they themselves were the test developers” (stated by Leila). On his argument on the same issue, Hassan cited that:

- *In the past some of M.A. students, particularly those who wanted to continue their education in their own universities knew the test generators who were their own teachers. In effect, they knew their teachers’ favorite areas and tried to study those areas more carefully. But thanks to the new exam, no one can have any preformed idea about the important contents. Therefore, you should study course content more carefully, because even the most trivial points in your view may be of importance for the test developers (respondent’s words).*

Another applicant, Narges, attributed the generated confusion to “annual changes in the important topics to study” for the new exam. She argued:

- *Annual changes in the important topics to study have been my biggest problem in my preparatory process for the new test. Each year some new technical areas and topics are added to the tests and some others are omitted. As far as I can remember, although I studied a lot for the previous test, most of test items looked new and odd to me (respondent’s words).*

Besides, the qualitative analysis of the applicants’ responses to the questions concerning the impact of the new exam on the study strategies the applicants utilized unveiled further perspectives on the washback effect of the new PPEE. It seems that how applicants regulate their study strategies is highly dictated by the new exam’s format because they firmly believed that the change in the form of the test items from essay type to multiple choice ones made the new exam more bits-and-pieces-oriented, requiring them to tailor their study to memorizing details (T2) and comprehending requisite technical information (T3) instead of gaining deeper and more informed insights to produce extended answers. As an example, Razieh maintained that the new test has made her “focus on every individual word along with trivial details and try to memorize even the abbreviations”. In line with Razieh, Mohsen asserted that:

- *The new test has affected the way I study the materials. You know, multiple choice questions are just concerned with comprehension, but essay type ones are completely different and related to production. Each type of test needs its own emphasis. For an essay type exam I tried to read the topic and reproduce what I have read for myself. However, it is not the case for the new type of exam. I just read and try to memorize the points (translated by the researchers).*



Three of the interviewees also were of the opinion that the new exam has made them study the required materials more intensively (T3). They believed that for the sake of preparing for the old exam, they used to have extensive reading in order to have a general understanding of the topics. Nahid, for instance, stated that “when I started studying for the new Ph.D. exam, I realized that I was not that good at testing or research methodology and this prompted me to study more specific materials more carefully and intensively.” Ali also commented that in order to study for the new exam, he usually read every single sentence very carefully, highlighted the important points, and tried to take note of the highlights because the new exam developers are “too pedantic.” Further, Razieh discussed how the new exam had made her employ different reading strategies:

- *Previously, when I wanted to study a topic, I employed fast-reading strategies in order to get a comprehensive insight about the gist of the regarded topic. For example, when I wanted to study a two-page text about, lets’ say, learning centered methods, I tried to study the two pages over and over to get fully insightful about that topic. I did not really heed trivial details. But currently, I take other ways into account to study for instance the same topic. I focus on every individual word along with trivial details and try to memorize even the abbreviations (Translated by the researchers).*

#### **4.2 Insights From Instructors**

Apart from benefiting from the remarks of the applicants on the washback effect of the new TEFL PPEE on their study plans and strategies, the view points of the participating instructors were also scrutinized. In their interviews, the instructors were asked whether they had observed any changes in Ph.D. applicants’ study plans and strategies. An analysis of the collected data elicited from the 10 university instructors teaching M.A. courses revealed that their opinions about the new PPEE effect on the study plans and strategies the applicants employed in order to prepare for the new exam were fairly similar. For instance, in line with the applicants’ view, six instructors were of the opinion that the new PPEE has generated the sense of confusion (T1) in the exam applicants with regard to the choice of materials and technical contents to study. Hossein, for example, cited that:

- *In the old form, university teachers’ preferences were decisive in deciding on the list of sources to include in the Ph.D. entrance exams. So, it was not so hard to guess the likely sources from which the exam questions were going to be extracted. You could easily visit the test developers who were the teachers working in the university in which you hoped to be admitted and ask them about the sources. However, the planning and administration procedures of the new test do not provide the applicants with the mentioned*

*opportunity. Applicants really do not know from what sources the questions are extracted, or which specific content areas are most significant. Every year they face some quite new and unfamiliar technical topics (respondent's words).*

Hamed also testified to the applicants' bafflement with the materials and technical contents covered in the new exam and said “. . . some of students come to us and ask whether the resources we teach are the ones included in the [Ph.D. program entrance] exam.”

The new exam, in the instructors' view, also had made the applicants develop exam-oriented strategies (T4) of memorization and comprehension rather than analysis, evaluation, and production strategies as demanded in the targeted program courses. The responses of four instructors with regard to the exam-oriented study plans of applicants are as follows:

- *Some applicants have attempted to make necessary changes. I have noted that some of them study quite hard; they pay attention to every single detail... For multiple choice items students go through the materials more meticulously in order to get familiar with dedicate aspects which might be important for exam purposes (Mehran's words).*
- *M.A. students' course study plans are oriented towards the Ph.D. exam. However, I suppose the new exam has deprived the students from the abilities to have logical analyses of subject matters they study because it seems possessing such abilities are not necessary to take the Ph.D. entrance exam successfully. In other words, they are only concerned with passing the exam gate and not what they are required to do afterwards (Amin's words).*
- *The other day one of my students came to me and we talked about university entrance exam. She said some people believe that the new university entrance exam is difficult, but she said it is much easier than its older version. She believed you should gear your study and learning strategies towards the exam, and if you are test-wised, you can take the test well, so it was so surprising to me that students talked about test-wiseness and things like that. I do not know why but she said that she only needs to be test-wised to pass the exam (Simin; translated by the researchers).*

Likewise, in response to the questions “have you observed any changes in applicants' learning strategies,” Javad argued, “yes, they have become exam oriented which is not preferable in my opinion.”

## 5. Discussion

Obtaining a Ph.D. degree has long been viewed as a gateway to social and educational accomplishments in Iran. Hence, a substantially growing number of Iranian applicants sit the TEFL PPEE every year to obtain the highest educational degree and, consequently, a highly qualified job. Due to prevalent administrative limitations in the Iranian context, Iranian universities are capable of offering courses to only a small proportion of Ph.D. applicants. This imbalance, indeed, creates a tough competitive atmosphere among the applicants seeking to sit PPEE and raises critical concerns about it. Such a sensitive and high-stakes exam inevitably influences its applicants, which calls for research to scrutinize as to how it actually impacts the test-takers.

This study, in line with a number of studies on the effects of testing on examinees' learning activities (e.g. Chu, 2009; Gall et al., 2003; Jou, 2010; Stoneman, 2006), examined the washback effect of the new TEFL PPEE on the applicants' learning and studying plans and strategies. In the light of the findings, it can be claimed that no clear announcement of the intended sources to be included in the exam by the organization in charge of developing the new Ph.D. exams (Sanjesh) has confused the applicants with the choice of materials to study and the technical contents covered. The results are in accord with the ones found by Chu (2009) and Jou (2010) in that the testing impacts varying study plans and methods test applicants bring into service in order to prepare for a test. Likewise, the results indicated that the new TEFL PPEE had made the applicants gear their study plans towards the exam-oriented strategies, which helped them get through it.

Given the nature of a test, applicants need to resort to different cognitive behaviors to succeed in the test. Accordingly, a test might call for no more than applicants' recall of data as the requisite behavior, whereas another might require its applicants to make evaluations and judgments about various issues to get through it. Blooms' cognitive taxonomy of educational objectives (1956) provides an inclusive classification of performance expectations in a given exam. He suggests six major cognitive levels starting from the simplest behavior to the most complex one. The taxonomy, as he prefers to call it, includes knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Using essay type questions, the old PPEE used to engage deeper and more profound insights as it required the applicants to produce extended answers through analyzing, synthesizing, or evaluating TEFL technical issues. Therefore, it appears that the old exam used to involve the more complex levels of the applicants' cognitive competence. Conversely, it can be argued that the inclusion of multiple choice items instead of essay type ones in the new exam has obviated the need to make evaluative judgments, and thus, provoked the applicants

to confine themselves to comprehending and memorizing details to tackle the questions.

## **6. Conclusion and Implications**

This study was an attempt to qualitatively investigate the washback effect of the new TEFL PPEE on the plans and strategies the exam applicants employ to study for the new exam from the point of view of Iranian university instructors and the applicants. The results generated from the qualitative data analysis of collected data revealed that the new TEFL PPEE, from the view points of the participants, has brought the applicants' study plans and strategies under influence in that in comparison to the old test, the new one has generated bafflement in terms of the covered technical contents, which eventually gives rise to defectively developed study plans. They also maintained that the new exam has been more bits-and-pieces-oriented, requiring the applicants to tailor their study to comprehending and memorizing details instead of gaining deeper insights to produce extended answers. The new exam, in instructors' view, has induced the applicants to develop exam-oriented strategies rather than analysis, evaluation, and production strategies as demanded in the targeted program courses.

As regards the pedagogical implications of the study, it is suggested that the exam developers specify officially the technical content areas of import or likely to be involved in the exam and expected to be mastered before getting admitted to the ultimate (Ph.D.) educational program. This will reduce the confusion of the applicants as to what to study and perhaps to plan how to study the content of interest. The study results also raises the exam developers' awareness that the exam in its current format taps into and calls for lower level of cognitive demands. It is essential that, at the very least, the exam be complemented by more open-ended items even short answer questions to engage and assess more analytical, synthetic, and evaluative capabilities of the applicants as they are supposed to be fostered in the applicants who make future experts.

Applicants' study plans and strategies are not undoubtedly the only factors affected by the new PPEE. Therefore, it seems quite worthwhile to conduct further research to investigate the washback effect of the new PPEE on other related aspects (for example, on applicants' motivation and instructors' teaching methods and assessment) in order to attain a more comprehensive view of the washback effect of such a sensitive exam. Besides, given the significance of the decision to be made based on the exam results, and the consequences to ensue, undertaking further research to examine the all-important reliability and validity of the exam could be of immense import.

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