

# The Washback Effect of Primary School Evaluation Test (UPSR) On Teaching And Learning: A Case Study Of An English Teacher In Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia

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**Abstract** - Examinations or tests are considered important in the process of teaching and learning. They could be beneficial or cause harmful effects, depending on how the educators, students, and other stakeholders deal with them. This study explores the washback effect of UPSR examination on teaching and learning to an English teacher in Sekolah Kebangsaan Pusat Kuala Ibai, Kuala Terengganu, Malaysia. The methods that are carried out are two observations and a semi-structured interview, which are analysed using the qualitative research method. Through the findings, it could be said that the washback effect of UPSR is evident through the language skills being emphasized by the teacher, and the teaching strategies and reference materials used when dealing with pupils in the classroom. It is hoped that through this study, other stakeholders such as parents and students would see the importance of other skills that are not being emphasised and some teaching strategies and reference materials that could be used in order to help in enhancing the English Language proficiency and achievement.

**Keywords** -- Washback Effect, UPSR, Teaching Strategies, Language Skills

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, the 11 years of compulsory schooling system requires the learners to sit for three major public examinations. However, for the purpose of this study, the researcher will only focus on the first major high-stakes testing, known as UPSR, the acronym of *Ujian Penilaian Sekolah Rendah* (Primary School Evaluation Test). This examination is carried out for the Year 6 primary school children.

Since English is the second language in our country, it is seen as important to be mastered, specifically to be passed by the students in the education system. The easiest method that has been used since those days until now by the teachers is the Grammar Translation Method (GTM), in which it let the students understand the element of the language in a faster way (Esmaeil Heydari Asl, 2015). However, as we are moving towards the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning, the teachers are encouraged to use the Communicative language Teaching (CLT) method that involves students with fun learning and enhances their communication skill. This is parallel with *Kurikulum Standard Sekolah Rendah (KSSR)* or Standard Curriculum for Primary Schools, which injects the elements

of communication and Language Arts in the textbook provided.

Starting from 2017, UPSR does not stand on its own anymore, whereby it is included in the *Pelaporan Pentaksiran Sekolah Rendah* (Primary School Assessment Report) or known as PPSR along with the other three components namely, psychometric assessment, classroom assessment, and sports, physical and curricular activities assessment. Nevertheless, the result that will be asked by the parents and measured by the higher stakeholders would still be the UPSR result. This sometimes inhibits the teachers' desire to use the 21<sup>st</sup> century learning best practices due to the time constraint and they could not see its relevance towards achieving excellent UPSR result, which only emphasizing on two skills: reading and writing.

Any high-stakes testing involves the determining functions in the candidates' life regarding their employment and overall achievement (Hadi Salehi & Melor Md Yunus 2012). In the case of UPSR, the overall result determines the school performance for the higher stakes to evaluate and to determine pupils' future secondary school. This is especially crucial for the learners who aim to be placed in the high-performing schools or prestigious boarding schools.

As mentioned previously, from the year of 2017, the Ministry of Education of Malaysia has changed its criteria to determine the intake into the prestigious boarding schools from emphasizing only on UPSR result to using all aspects of PPSR with an addition of some special tests from the institution or organization. For instance, to enter the prestigious boarding schools, students are required to sit for UKSBP (*Ujian Kemasukan Sekolah Berasrama Penuh*), which is the newly entrance test for the prestigious boarding schools. Besides that, students who want to enter *Maktab Rendah Sains MARA (MRSM)* or MARA Junior Science College are required to take *Ujian Kecenderungan Kemasukan ke MRSM (UKKM)* and there are specific tests for the students who would like to pursue their secondary education in the religious secondary schools as well.

Looking back to the recent history, UPSR result is proven to be instilled as of utmost importance by the fiasco of the leaked UPSR English papers in 2014. Not to mention, the cost that has been spent by the parents who enroll their children for lesson in the tuition classes indicate the seriousness of getting the best result in UPSR. While it is a good sign that the citizens really care for the children's

education, it is more worrying that because of this pressure, the teachers might ignore the need to emphasize on all four-language skills because of the pressure from their surroundings.

Apart from this, most of the publishers are competing with each other to produce the exam-like modules and example of the past years questions. These modules attracted the schools and parents to be given to the learners as the preparation for them to sit for the exam. Nevertheless, despite of all the scenarios there will still be a great numbers of teachers who accentuate the importance of meaningful learning regardless students' achievements or type of classes.

The researches of washback in other countries highlight more on the public examinations of the secondary schools and university level. Therefore, in order to fill in the gap of washback research for primary school that is rarely seen in any country, this study aims to employ the qualitative method in generating the understanding of the washback effect of UPSR examination on teaching and learning in a Malaysian Year 6 English Language classroom. There are three research questions employed in this study:

1. Which English Language skills are given more emphasis by the teacher during teaching and learning practices in the examination class? Why?
2. How does UPSR examination influence teacher's teaching strategies in the classroom?
3. What are the differences in terms of materials used by the teacher when teaching in the examination class and non-examination class?

## II. DEFINITION OF WASHBACK

As there are many assessments being introduced in the global education systems, the term washback or backwash has been used widely around the world. Bachman and Palmer (1996) defines washback as the influence of testing on teaching and learning, which happens especially if the test gives a big impact to the learners' future and the pass rates is used as the key performance to the particular institutions. This washback effect can be either helpful or damaging.

According to Messick (1996), washback is the extent of how a test could influence teachers and students' activities in the classroom that they actually will not do that could promote or inhibit learning. As there are many definitions of washback, the readers should also know that there is a distinction between washback and impact in testing. Tsagari (2007) asserts that washback would refer to the effects that tests have on teaching and learning while impact would be dealing with a wider educational contexts such as on individual, policies, the school, the educational system or societies as a whole.

## III. THEORETICAL DISCUSSION

Washback is not merely about the test design and its effect, but involves a lot of other aspects such as people

around it and the process of dealing with the test demand. In order to understand more on how the objectives of this study will be achieved, this study adopts the trichotomy of backwash model by Hughes (1993, as cited in Hadi Salehi & Melor Md Yunus, 2012) and Bailey (1996), who then developed the model as could be seen in Figure 1. This model shows the washback function in actual contexts of teaching and learning. In this model, Hughes name three aspects of washback, namely, participants, process, and product.

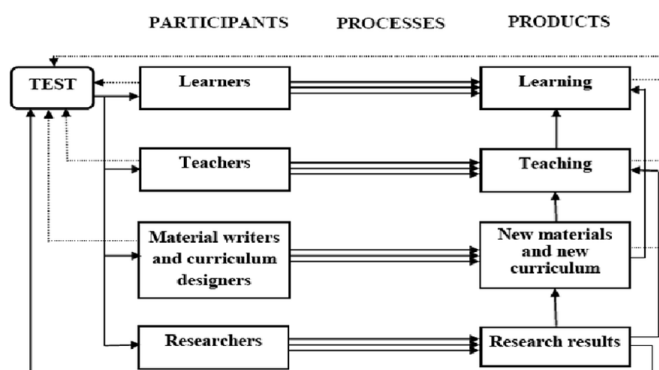


Figure 1: The Basic Model of Washback (Bailey, 1996)

### Washback on Participants

Participants are those who involve with the testing process and whose work that might be affected by the test such as teachers, administrators, material developers, and learners. In this study, the participants would be the teacher and the pupils.

### Washback on Process

The activities or actions taken by the participants in contributing towards learning are called the process. Some of the elements that come under process are the teaching strategies used by the teacher, teaching content and reference materials. The teaching strategies include lecture method, discovery learning, group discussion. Besides teaching strategies, teaching content and reference materials are always being affected by the examination. According to Shohamy et al. (1996), more instructional time are used to prepare for the examination, especially in the case of high-stakes testing.

### Washback on Product

The last aspect is the product, which is the quality or the outcome from the process. One of the aspects that is related to product is the language skills learnt by the students in the classroom such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and grammar.

## VI. METHOD

This study employed qualitative research approach since it was an individual case study. The sample was the most suitable candidate for this study since she was teaching both

levels in the primary school, the Year 1 in lower primary and the Year 6 in the upper primary level. This made it easier for the researcher to see any differences in terms of treatment by the teacher towards the examination and non-examination classroom.

There were two research tools being used in this study, which were two classroom observations and a semi-structured interview. The observations were being done in the Year 6 classroom followed by the Year 1 classroom. The researcher adopted the observation checklist that was based on a systematic observation scheme, which was the Communication Orientation of Language Teaching (COLT) Observation Scheme by Frohlic and Spada (1995, as cited in Rolin-Ianziti, 2014). During the observation, the elements that had been observed were the language skills, teaching strategies used, teacher and students' activities, reference materials used, and the time used by the teacher and students for the activities.

Due to the time constraint and a variety of school obligations that needed to be attended by the participant, the semi-structured interview was finally conducted by using the voice notes of WhatsApp application. It was done in a real-time synchronous communication in the afternoon after school hour at the participant's and researcher's house respectively. This means that even though the participant and the researcher did not sit in front of each other at the same place, the one-on-one semi-structured interview could still be conducted synchronously. The researcher and the participant prepared themselves with their respective smartphone, and they directly responded to each other whenever one party replied to the other's voice note. This session took 45 minutes to be completed. Since the participant was a proficient user of English, the session was carried out fully in English.

## VII. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *Language Skills that are Given More Emphasis in the Examination Class*

From the findings, it was evident that writing, reading, and grammar skills were given more emphasis in the Year 6 classroom by the teacher compared to listening and speaking skills. During the classroom observation, these three skills were taught and writing skill took most of the time during the activities.

This happened in other countries as well such as in Pakistan in which the language skills tested in the examination were grammar, vocabulary, reading comprehension, and writing which made the educators opt to have *GTM* as their preferred way of delivering the skills. Cheng and Watanabe (2004) also had the same view as they

addressed the tendency of teacher to touch on reading and writing skills in class while ignoring the skills of listening and speaking that were not included in the examination.

However, the participant of this study did not neglect the teaching of listening and speaking skills. She still taught them even though the time allotted was minimal. This might be due to the personal factors of the teacher, which were her teaching experience and her personal beliefs. The participant had been teaching for ten years and this could still be considered as new in the teaching profession. According to Shohamy, Donisa-Schmidt, and Ferman (1996), teachers with more experience in the teaching field tended to be more exam-oriented compared to the ones with less experience since the latter loved to try to learn something new from their everyday teaching experience.

### *The Influence of UPSR Examination on the Teacher Teaching Strategies*

The washback effect of *UPSR* on pedagogy could clearly be seen during the observation and later was admitted during the interview. The pupils relied on the teacher to guide and correct their mistakes while carrying out the activity and the teacher did a lot of modelling to strengthen pupils' skills in producing a good essay. This was happening around the world as well like the neighbouring country, whereby teachers admitted to change their teaching method in order to cater for the exam preparation (Didi Sukyadi & Ridha Mardiani, 2011).

While delivering the lesson, the teacher was found to be using three teaching strategies, namely lecture style, group work, and brainstorming. The teacher used lecture style while explaining the instruction and task to the whole class. She used this teaching strategy to ensure that pupils would fully understand the task and this would save the class time from being used to explain the task repeatedly.

In most of the session, the strategy used by the teacher to let pupils carry out the task was group work. It helped the teacher to give feedback easily since to check individual essay would be a hassle and time consuming.

The next strategy used by the teacher was brainstorming. This could be found when the teacher prompted the pupils to share their ideas on how to write the introduction for the story. When the group members gave more ideas, the teacher showed them on how to select the best ones to be used as their introduction. The teacher also included her idea in the brainstorming session to model to pupils the characteristics of ideas that could be put as the introduction of a narrative essay.

### *The Differences of Materials Used by the Teacher in the Examination and Non-examination Class*

From the observations conducted in both examination and non-examination classes, the similarity that could be seen was the teacher still based their teaching on the topics from the textbook even though it was not directly being used

during the sessions. For the differences, the teacher used more interesting and eye-catching materials for the non-examination class, which were the YouTube video that showed familiar and colourful images and had a song in it, and colourful thin books. This might be due to the belief that young learners always make sense of the world and communicate with their surroundings to retrieve knowledge and language (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel (2001).

For the examination class, the teacher used the worksheet from UPSR Model Book that had the exercise similar to the UPSR format. This was parallel to what Shohamy et al. (1996) had stated in their research that more instructional time are used to prepare for the examination, especially in the case of high-stakes testing. The preparation for examination would then lead to the usage of exam-related books and previous exam papers (Spratt, 2005).

### VIII. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, getting a good UPSR result is regarded as the cornerstone of the students' academic achievement in the Malaysian primary schools. As a result, it brings various effects to all the stakeholders, especially teachers, students, and parents.

This study provides clear evidence that the washback of UPSR could be seen from three aspects, which are the language skills that are more emphasised in the examination classroom, the influence on teaching strategies used in the class, and the reference material being used in examination and non-examination classes. The findings of this study might be unique to Malaysian primary classrooms, which might bring different results if conducted in other contexts thus calling for more studies on the washback effect in relation to other stakeholders to get more perspectives from different views.

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