



## Advance Social Science Archive Journal

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>

Vol.3 No.1, January-March, 2025. Page No. 1128-1137

Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)

Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)



### EXAM-DRIVEN PEDAGOGY: THE WASHBACK EFFECT OF HSSC-ELE ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN KOHAT DISTRICT, PAKISTAN

**Khursheed Ahmad**

Department of English, University of Swabi

Email: [khursheedlinguistic@uoswabi.edu.pk](mailto:khursheedlinguistic@uoswabi.edu.pk)

**Saba Sadia**

Department of English, The Govt. Sadiq College Women University, Bahawalpur

**Mahtab Alam**

Department of English, Govt. Postgraduate College, Kohat

#### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the influence of the Higher Secondary School Certificate English Language Examination (HSSC-ELE) on teaching practices in Kohat District, Pakistan. Using a quantitative research design, data was collected from 254 English language teachers through a 19-item Likert-scale questionnaire. The findings reveal that the HSSC-ELE exerts a strong influence on classroom practices, with teachers prioritizing exam-specific content and techniques to ensure student success. Key practices include focusing on grammar, using past papers, and aligning teaching objectives with exam requirements. Teachers often avoid methods that do not directly contribute to exam performance, such as teaching communication skills, due to the high-stakes nature of the test. The study highlights a tension between exam preparation and holistic language learning. While some teachers attempt to incorporate broader skills, systemic pressures and the exam's rigid structure often limit their efforts. These findings align with previous research on washback effects, demonstrating how high-stakes exams can narrow teaching focus and discourage innovation. The study concludes that reforms are needed to reduce the negative impact of the HSSC-ELE, such as incorporating assessments of speaking and listening skills and encouraging more communicative teaching methods. Such changes could help align exam goals with the broader objective of promoting genuine language proficiency among students.

**Keywords:** Washback Effect, High-Stakes Testing, English Language Teaching, Exam Preparation, Curriculum Alignment

#### INTRODUCTION

The influence of a test on pedagogical practices, commonly known as washback in applied linguistics (Cheng, 2001) and backwash in educational studies (Biggs, 1996), invites a debate on understanding how evaluation frameworks shape instructional

practices and how it determines certain directions. While tests are designed to measure learning outcomes, their operationalization often inevitably determine curricular priorities, teaching methodologies, and learning strategies (Wall & Alderson, 1993; Shohamy, 1992). This relationship between testing and pedagogy has been extensively discussed and debated among scholars. The conclusion so far is that washback is neither monolithic nor linear; rather, it is a dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon depending on the contextual, institutional, and socio-cultural variables (Cheng et al., 2004; Green, 2007).

Shohamy (1992) highlights how tests act as powerful tools that decide what is seen as valid in education. Their results often shape critical choices, like where students are placed or how schools get funding. Because these decisions matter so much, tests end up having too much control over "what counts as knowledge" (Madaus, 1988, p. 9). This can push schools to focus only on tested material, a problem Au (2007) calls "curriculum alignment distortion."

Wall and Alderson's (1993) influential study of Sri Lanka's English exams sparked deeper research into how tests influence teaching (termed "washback"). They proposed 15 ideas about this relationship, and studies across different countries (e.g., Cheng, 2005; Tsagari, 2009) have confirmed key points: tests shape what teachers teach, how they teach, what students focus on, and how quickly material is covered. For example, Watanabe (2004) found Japanese teachers skipped communication practice to drill grammar for entrance exams—a pattern also seen in Pakistan's high-stakes testing (Khalid, 2006; Shamsi, 2006).

The idea of "washback"—how tests influence teaching—is widely debated. While some argue it can lead to negative outcomes, like encouraging rote memorization, others point out it's not always harmful and can even spark positive changes, such as new teaching methods (Bailey, 1996). Recent research shows that teachers respond to test pressures in different ways. Some resist by creatively adding communication-focused activities despite exam constraints (Xu & Liu, 2009), while others strictly follow test-focused methods due to pressure from schools (Menken, 2008). As Messick (1996) notes, washback depends on how test design, teacher freedom, and accountability systems interact (p. 244).

In Pakistan, the Higher Secondary School Certificate English Language Examination (HSSC-EEE) plays a major role in shaping education. It acts as a gatekeeper for university admission and heavily influences how English is taught. The exam focuses on grammar and formulaic essay writing (Hasan, 2009), which has led to a "pedagogy of compliance" where teachers prioritize exam preparation over helping students truly learn the language (Ali, 2018). This study explores how the HSSC-EEE's design,

particularly its lack of speaking and listening components, limits teaching innovation in Kohat's higher secondary schools.

### **The HSSC-EEE in Pakistan's Education System**

The HSSC-EEE is a high-stakes exam that determines students' access to professional colleges in fields like medicine, engineering, and IT. Because of this, both students and teachers focus heavily on exam performance, often at the expense of developing real language skills (Shamsi, 2006).

### **Exam Structure and Criticisms**

The HSSC-EEE has two parts: a multiple-choice section (20%) and a subjective section (80%). The subjective part includes questions on literature, poetry, essays, and grammar. Critics argue that the exam's heavy focus on grammar and vocabulary ignores speaking and listening skills, leading to what some call "mute and deaf English"—students score well but can't communicate effectively (Khalid, 2006, cited in Hasan, p. 84). This is partly due to teachers relying on rote memorization to prepare students for the exam.

### **Evidence of the Exam's Flaws**

Data from Kohat University and the local education board show high failure rates in English, highlighting the exam's inability to measure—or encourage—practical language skills. This leaves students unprepared for both higher education and real-world communication.

### **This Study's Focus**

While many countries are moving toward tests that assess communication skills, Pakistan's HSSC-EEE remains focused on grammar and memorization. This study examines how the exam shapes teaching methods in Kohat District, where the local education board administers the test. It looks at how teachers adapt their lessons, choose content, and use materials to meet exam demands. Based on the English language examination structure and its impact on the classroom teaching, the current study attempted to address the following broader researcher question:

- How does the Higher Secondary School Certificate English Language Examination (HSSC-ELE) influence English language teaching practices in Kohat District, Pakistan?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The current study used a quantitative research approach to explore how the HSSC English Language Examination (HSSC-ELE) influences teaching methods. A quantitative design was chosen because it allows for objective measurement of the exam's impact

and because many teachers were unwilling to participate in more time-consuming qualitative methods like interviews or classroom observations.

**Participants**

The study involved 254 English language teachers from higher secondary schools in Kohat District, Pakistan. The group included an equal number of male (127) and female (127) teachers. To get a broader perspective, retired professors who had previously taught HSSC-ELE were also included. This mix helped capture both historical and current teaching trends.

**Instrumentation**

Data was collected using a 19-item questionnaire with a Likert scale, where teachers rated their agreement with statements about how the exam influences their teaching. The scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was tested in two phases across different areas of Kohat District to ensure it was reliable and valid. The pilot test showed strong reliability, with a Cronbach’s alpha score of 0.87, confirming the tool was suitable for the study.

**Data Collection**

After the pilot test, the questionnaire was given to all 254 participants. The data was analysed using SPSS Version 26. Mean scores were used to interpret the strength of the exam’s influence. Similarly, A team of statisticians from the Department of Statistics verified the analysis to ensure accuracy.

Strong Effect: Mean scores of 3.5–5.0

Moderate Effect: Mean scores of 2.5–3.49

Weak Effect: Mean scores of 1.5–2.49

**Ethical Considerations**

Participants’ anonymity was guaranteed, and they gave informed consent before taking part. Retired professors participated voluntarily, with no incentives offered to avoid any pressure.

**Limitations**

While the study included all active HSSC-ELE teachers in Kohat District, its findings may not apply to other regions in Pakistan. Additionally, relying on self-reported data could introduce bias, though insights from retired teachers helped balance this concern.

**DATA ANALYSIS**

**Table 1. Activities and Time**

Item	S.A %	A %	N.O %	D %	S.D %	Mean	Item Effect
1. I want to conduct activities that boost my students' test-taking skills and confidence.	11.5	65.4	11.5	11.5	0.00	3.77	Strong

2. If HSSC-ELE is cancelled, I'll adjust our classroom time accordingly.	26.9	38.5	7.7	19.2	7.7	3.58	Strong
3. I focus more on grammar since it's a key part of the HSSC-ELE exam.	23.1	46.2	7.7	15.4	7.7	4.13	Strong
4. I only choose activities that align with HSSC-ELE objectives.	11.5	50	11.5	19.2	7.7	3.38	Strong
<b>5. When HSSC-ELE dates are near, I teach my students test-taking strategies to help them succeed.</b>	<b>30.8</b>	<b>53.8</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>0.0</b>	<b>4.04</b>	<b>Strong</b>

**DA = Disagree, SA = Strongly Disagree, NO = No Opinion, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree**

The Table above shows that language teachers in Pakistan focus on activities in the classroom that help students improve their test skills at the HSSC level. This practice is quite strong, as shown by the high effect score of 3.77. If the HSSC-ELE exam were cancelled, teachers would adjust their teaching methods, particularly in how they allocate time for different topics. This is supported by the strong effect score of 3.58. Since the exam is mostly grammar-based, teachers spend most of the academic year teaching only grammar. This is a very common practice in Pakistani schools and colleges, reflected by the strongest effect score of 4.13. Teachers tend to choose classroom activities that align directly with the objectives of the HSSC-ELE exam. This approach is popular, as indicated by the strong effect score of 3.38. To make sure students score higher on the HSSC-ELE, teachers focus on teaching test-taking techniques, especially as the exam dates approach. This is evident from the strong effect score of 4.04.

**Table 2. Teaching method**

Item	S.A %	A %	N.O %	D %	S.D %	Mean	Item Effect
6. I choose teaching methods that are directly aligned with helping my students excel in the HSSC-ELE exam.	38.5	42.3	7.7	11.5	0.00	4.08	Strong
7. I focus on teaching the specific skills that are tested in the HSSC-ELE.	53.8	38.5	3.8	3.8	0.00	4.42	Strong
8. I avoid using teaching methods that I feel won't contribute to my students' success in the HSSC-ELE.	23.1	61.5	3.8	11.5	0.00	3.96	Strong

9. The HSSC-ELE has significantly shaped the way I teach.	19.2	46.2	15.4	19.4	0.00	3.65	Strong
<b>10. I rarely choose to use those methods that can help my students score higher grades on the exam.</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>19.2</b>	<b>3.8</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>2.62</b>	<b>Moderate</b>

Table No. 2 highlights that teachers strongly prefer methods that help students achieve good grades on the HSSC-ELE exam. This tendency is clear from the strong effect score of 4.08. While English is typically divided into four skills, teachers prioritize teaching the skills tested on the HSSC-ELE, like reading and writing. This is reflected by the very strong effect score of 4.42. Teachers avoid methods that don't directly contribute to exam success, as shown by the strong effect score of 3.96. The HSSC-ELE exam heavily influences teaching methods, with teachers focusing only on what's tested. This is supported by the strong effect score of 3.65. Teachers consistently use methods aimed at boosting students' HSSC-ELE scores, though this practice has a slightly lower effect score compared to others.

**Table 3. Material Selection**

Item	S.A %	A %	N.O %	D %	S.D %	Mean	Item Effect
11. I use in supplementary materials to help my students score higher on the test.	34.6	57.7	0.00	0.00	7.7	4.12	Strong
12. I urge my students to memorise those questions that are likely to be tested on the exam.	23.1	42.3	0.00	23.1	11.5	3.42	Moderate
13. I advise my students to study and solve past papers to get familiar with the exam format.	50	42.3	7.7	0.00	0.00	4.42	Strong
<b>14. I lean toward using supplementary materials that can help my students perform well on the exam.</b>	<b>19.3</b>	<b>69.2</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>4.08</b>	<b>Strong</b>

Table No. 03 suggest that teachers often use extra materials alongside the prescribed textbooks to ensure students score higher on the English exam. This is a common practice, as shown by the strong effect score of 4.12. Before exams, teachers suggest techniques like reviewing and memorizing expected questions, though not all teachers

follow this approach. This is indicated by the moderate effect score of 3.42. Solving past HSSC-ELE papers is highly recommended by teachers, as certain questions tend to repeat each year. This practice is very popular, with a strong effect score of 4.42. Supplementary materials are a key part of teaching because they help students achieve better grades on the HSSC-ELE. This is supported by the strong effect score of 4.08.

**Table 4. Content selection**

Item	S.A %	A %	N.O %	D %	S.D %	Mean	Item Effect
15. I skip chapters that aren't relevant to the HSSC-ELE exam to focus on what matters most.	11.5	34.6	7.7	30.8	15.4	2.96	Moderate
16. The HSSC-ELE exam shapes how I prioritize and sequence my teaching objectives.	15.4	65.4	7.7	11.5	0.00	3.85	Strong
17. I include all the material that will help my students to score higher on the exam.	34.6	46.2	11.5	7.7	0.00	4.08	Strong
18. My course content clearly reflects the objectives of the exam.	26.9	42.3	3.8	23.1	3.8	3.65	Strong
<b>19. I teach all chapter in the textbook, even if some might not be tested on the HSSC-ELE, to ensure a well-rounded understanding.</b>	<b>11.5</b>	<b>53.8</b>	<b>0.00</b>	<b>19.2</b>	<b>15.4</b>	<b>3.27</b>	<b>Moderate</b>

Table No. 04 shows that while some teachers focus only on chapters likely to appear on the HSSC-ELE, many cover the entire textbook. This is reflected by the moderate effect score of 2.96. Teachers often prioritize teaching chapters expected to be on the exam first, as shown by the strong effect score of 3.85. Other chapters are covered later, though not by all teachers. Using relevant content for teaching is a common practice in Pakistani classrooms, supported by the strong effect score of 4.08. Teachers aim to meet the objectives of English language exam, which is their primary goal when teaching English at the intermediate level. This is evident from the strong effect score of 3.65. Teachers are divided on whether to cover all textbook chapters or only those relevant to the exam. While some stick to exam-focused chapters, others teach the entire book, as shown by the moderate effect score of 3.27.

## **DISCUSSION**

The study reveals that the HSSC-ELE has a strong influence on teaching practices in Kohat District. Teachers tend to focus on exam-specific items due to the high stakes of the test, which is considered very important for students' futures. Moreover, limited time also play a crucial role, as teachers strive to cover both exam material and broader language skills.

It is pertinent to mention that English teachers use traditional teaching methods such as grammar drills and past paper practice, aligning closely with the English language paper format. However, a few younger teachers with advanced face to face and online trainings continue to incorporate more communicative approaches. However, they face challenges due to the exam's format and pressure from administration and parents.

This study confirms the findings of the studies carried out by Wall and Alderson (1993) and Cheng (2001), which found that high-stakes exams always encourage test-oriented teaching and discourage innovative methods. The reliance on past papers and memorization for exam success is seen as a serious concern which promote rote learning over genuine language proficiency.

## **CONCLUSION**

The study concludes that the HSSC-ELE shapes English language teaching in Kohat District, encouraging teachers to prioritize exam preparation over language learning. While some teachers are found to incorporate broader skills, pressure from relevant quarters and the exam's format often pose challenges to practice innovative teaching methods. To mitigate the negative impact, reforms in English language test should include assessments of speaking and listening skills and encourage more innovative teaching methods. This would help align exam goals with the broader aim of promoting true language proficiency.

## **REFERENCES**

- Ali, M. (2018). The pedagogy of compliance: English language teaching in Pakistan. *Journal of Language and Education*, 4(3), 45–56.
- Andrews, S. (1994). The washback effect of examinations: Its impact upon curriculum innovation in English language teaching. *Curriculum Forum*, 1, 44–58.
- Au, W. (2007). High-stakes testing and curricular control: A qualitative metasynthesis. *Educational Researcher*, 36(5), 258–267. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X07306523>



- Bailey, K. M. (1996). Working for washback: A review of the washback concept in language testing. *Language Testing*, 13(3), 257–279. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026553229601300303>
- Biggs, J. (1996). Enhancing teaching through constructive alignment. *Higher Education*, 32(3), 347–364. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00138871>
- Chen, L. (2002). Washback of a public exam on English teaching. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED472167).
- Cheng, L. (1997). How does washback influence teaching? Implications for Hong Kong. *Language and Education*, 11(1), 38–54.
- Cheng, L. (2001). Washback studies: Methodological considerations. *Curriculum Forum*, 10(2), 17–32.
- Cheng, L. (2004). The washback effect of a public examination change on teachers' perceptions toward their classroom teaching. In L. Cheng, Y. Watanabe, & A. Curtis (Eds.), *Washback in language testing: Research contexts and methods* (pp. 147–170). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Cheng, L. (2005). *Changing language teaching through language testing: A washback study*. Cambridge University Press.
- Green, A. (2007). *IELTS washback in context: Preparation for academic writing in higher education*. Cambridge University Press.
- Hasan, S. A. (2009). English language teaching in Pakistan. Retrieved December 18, 2009, from <http://www.articlesbase.com/languages-articles/English-language-teaching-in-pakistan1326181.html>
- Hawkey, R. (2006). *Impact theory and practice: Studies of the IELTS test and Progetto Lingue 2000*. Cambridge University Press.
- Khalid, A. (2006). The impact of high-stakes testing on teaching and learning: A case study of Pakistan. *Journal of Educational Research*, 10(2), 78–89.
- Madaus, G. F. (1988). The influence of testing on the curriculum. In L. N. Tanner (Ed.), *Critical issues in curriculum: 87th yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education* (pp. 83–121). University of Chicago Press.
- Manjarres, N. B. (2005). *Washback of the foreign language tests of the state examination in Colombia: A case study*. University of Arizona.
- Menken, K. (2008). *English learners left behind: Standardized testing as language policy*. Multilingual Matters.
- Messick, S. (1996). Validity and washback in language testing. *Language Testing*, 13(3), 241–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/026553229601300302>
- Read, J. (1999). The policy context of English testing for immigrants. Paper presented at the Language Testing Research Colloquium.

- Shamsi, A. F. (2006). The impact of high-stakes testing on English language teaching in Pakistan. *Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 5(1), 45–60.
- Shohamy, E. (1992). Beyond proficiency testing: A diagnostic feedback testing model for assessing foreign language learning. *Modern Language Journal*, 76(4), 513–521.
- Tsagari, D. (2009). The complexity of test washback: An empirical study. Peter Lang.
- Wall, D., & Alderson, J. C. (1993). Examining washback: The Sri Lankan impact study. *Language Testing*, 10(1), 41–69.
- Watanabe, Y. (2004). Methodology in washback studies. In L. Cheng, Y. Watanabe, & A. Curtis (Eds.), *Washback in language testing: Research contexts and methods* (pp. 19–36). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- Xu, J., & Liu, Y. (2009). Teacher assessment knowledge and practice: A narrative inquiry of a Chinese college EFL teacher's experience. *TESOL Quarterly*, 43(3), 493–513. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1545-7249.2009.tb00246.x>