

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS NATIONAL EXAMINATION: A WASHBACK STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate students' perception towards the National Examination (Ujian Nasional/UN) and its positive and negative effects (washback). The study was a qualitative research using a survey method. It involved XII-grade students who had taken the examination from some vocational senior high schools in East Ciputat, South Tangerang, Banten, i.e. SMK Triguna Utama, SMK YMJ and SMK Moh. Husni Thamrin. A questionnaire was therefore constructed to elicit their beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and/or opinions regarding the UN. The findings showed almost all of the students believed that National Examination could increase their learning intensity, or, in other words, UN could motivate them to study harder. However, there was also revealed that the students doubted and questioned the effectiveness and importance of UN in creating better teaching learning process. These thus indicated that National Examination had positive as well as negative washback on teaching learning activities of XII-grade students of some vocational senior high schools in South Tangerang.

Keywords: *washback, testing, national examination*

INTRODUCTION

Testing is universal feature of social life. Throughout history, people have been put to the test to prove their capabilities or to establish their credentials (McNamara, 2008, p. 3). Testing for purposes of detection or to establish identity has become an accepted part of sport, law, medicine, and other fields including education.

Our education system is awash with various high stakes testing, be it standardized, multiple-choice testing or portfolio assessment. *Washback*, a term

commonly used in applied linguistics, refers to the influence of language testing on teaching and learning. The extensive use of examination scores for various educational and social purposes in society nowadays has made the washback affect a distinct educational phenomenon. This is both in general education and in teaching English as a second or foreign language, from kindergarten to grade XII classrooms to the tertiary level (Cheng *et al.*, 2004).

Moreover, in Indonesia particularly, National Examination (in Indonesian language: *Ujian Nasional*, commonly abbreviated as *UN*) is a standard evaluation system of primary and secondary education. It is administered and conducted by the Center for Educational Assessment, The Ministry of Education and Culture, based on *Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia* no. 20 year 2003 that stated, in order to control the quality of education nationwide to be evaluated as a form of accountability of educational providers to the parties concerned (Kemdikbud, 2011, p. 37).

Therefore, based on the explanations above, the writer would like to conduct a survey research on **Students' Perceptions towards National Examination (UN)** to find out if there was either any positive or negative washback of the National Examination (UN) on teaching learning activities of XII-grade students of some vocational senior high schools, i.e. SMK Triguna Utama, SMK YMJ and SMK Moh. Husni Thamrin, in East Ciputat, South Tangerang, Banten, and to elaborate their beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and/or opinions towards the National Examination.

Washback

Washback is the effect of testing on instruction. Language test washback is said to be either positive or negative.

Negative washback is said to occur when test items are based on an outdated view of language which bears little relationship to the teaching curriculum. If, for example, the skill of writing is tested only by multiple-choice items, then there is great pressure to practise such items rather than to practise the skill of writing itself. Any important test which remains very structure based may be said to have negative washback if its influence prevents desired changes in proficiency teaching towards a more communicative methodology.

Positive washback is said to result when a testing procedure which encourages "good" teaching practice is introduced. For example, the use of an oral interview in a final examination may encourage teachers to practise conversational language use with their students. However, when the testing procedure is too much in advance of the teaching method it is unlikely that positive washback will occur because teachers and learners may not understand what the test items require of them. It has been pointed out that there is little empirical evidence for many of the claims which are made about the positive

or negative impact of language testing (Davies *et al.*, 2002, p. 225).

The power of tests in determining the life chances of individuals and in influencing the reputation of teachers and schools means that they can have a strong influence on the curriculum. The effect of tests on teaching and learning is known as test wash-back. Ethical language testing practice, it is felt, should work to ensure positive wash-back from tests.

For example, it is sometimes argued that performance assessments have better washback than multiple-choice test formats or other individual item formats, such as cloze, which focus on isolated elements of knowledge or skill. As performance assessments require integration of knowledge and skills in performance on realistic tasks, preparation for such assessments will presumably encourage teachers and students to spend time engaged in performance of such tasks as part of the teaching. In contrast, multiple choice format item tests of knowledge of grammar or vocabulary may inhibit communicative approaches to learning and teaching.

Authorities responsible for assessment sometimes use assessment reform to drive curriculum reform, believing that the assessment can be

designed to have positive washback on the curriculum. However, research both on the presumed negative washback of conservative test formats, and on the presumed positive washback of communicative assessment (assumed to be more progressive) has shown that washback is often rather unpredictable. Whether or not the desired effect is achieved will depend on local conditions in classrooms, the established traditions of teaching, the immediate motivation of learners, and the frequently unpredictable ways in which classroom interactions develop. These can only be established after the event, post hoc, on the basis of information collected once the reform has been introduced (McNamara, 2008, pp. 73—74).

Testing

There are numerous terms for educational testing, including TEFL. It could be examination, evaluation, measurement, assessment or test. All those terminologies have slight similarities and differences and are used interchangeably. And in this sub-chapter, we preferred to use the term test or testing due to its common use and theoretical and practical considerations. Yet, let us review some of those words briefly.

First of all, the term examination usually refers to a formal set-piece kind of assessment. Typically one or more three-hour papers have to be worked. Pupils are isolated from one another and usually have no access to textbooks, notes or dictionaries. An examination of this kind may be set by the teachers or head of department in a school, or by some central examining body like the Ministry of Education in various countries. This usage of the word examination is fairly consistent in the literature on the subject (Broughton, Brumfit, Flavell, Hill, and Pincas, 2003, p. 145).

Literally, evaluation means measurement, and, terminologically, it is a kind of qualitative descriptions of pupil behavior. It is a part of the novice teacher's checklist to guide the development of initial lesson plans and teaching practice, a process of determining learning achievements or student satisfaction, and a dimension of the analysis of data in a formal evaluation or research study. It also refers to judgements about students by teachers and by external assessors; the performance of teachers by their students, program managers and institutions; and programs, departments and institutions by internal assessors, external monitors and

inspectors. Evaluation is about the relationships between different program components, the procedures and epistemologies developed by the people involved in programs, and the processes and outcomes which are used to show the value of a program and enhance the instructional development (Kiely and Rea-Dickins, 2005, p. 5). Whilst, Gronlund (1981) defined evaluation as a systematic process of determining the extent to which instructional objectives are achieved by pupils.

Meanwhile, assessment, sometimes called classroom or teacher assessment, refers to assessment carried out by teachers in the classroom. It may be formative when teachers are collecting information about children's strengths and weaknesses in order to provide feedback to learners and to make further decisions about teaching. Otherwise, it can be summative when teachers are collecting information at the end of a period of time, generally, to report to others about children's progress. Summative assessment carried out by teachers may also inform their own teaching, if, for example, the learners return to them in the following school year. Formative assessment is also called assessment for learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998). Not all assessment in the

classroom is classroom assessment. If teachers are administering tests in the classroom prepared by others, this is not considered to be classroom assessment because it is not prepared by the teacher but by others who are at least one step, and maybe many steps, removed from the learners and the learning situation of the classroom.

Moreover, in Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary, test is defined as an examination of somebody's knowledge or ability, consisting of questions for them to answer or activities for them to perform. According to Brown (2004, p. 3), test is a method of measuring a person's ability, knowledge, or performance in a given domain, so that there should be limitation on what students will be tested.

Teaching and testing are inseparable. Those things are enjoined altogether to achieve any educational goals, i.e. national, institutional or instructional goals. Undoubtedly, testing has a vital role in teaching learning process. However, test in teaching learning process has at least two positions. They are secondary and primary. The secondary position of a test is when it follows teaching activities. Here, the test acts to reinforce teaching. While, the

primary one is when a test is conducted before teaching activities.

In addition, there are some reasons for conducting a test in teaching learning activities (process). They are placement, diagnostic, achievement, and proficiency tests (Harmer, 2008). Firstly, placement test is carried out to place new students in the right class of a school. It is usually based on syllabi and materials the students will follow and use once their level has been decided. This kind of test could be assess students' productive and receptive skills. Some schools ask students to assess themselves as the self-analysis before the final placing decision.

Next, diagnostic test is designed to show how good a student is in relation to a previously agreed system of levels. It could also expose learner difficulties, gaps in their knowledge, and skill deficiencies during a course. Thus, we know what the problems are and what we can do something about them.

Third, achievement test is used to measure learners' skill and achievement of teaching learning objectives. This test only works if it contains item types which the students are familiar with. If they face a completely new material, the test therefore cannot measure the learning that has been taking place. At the end of the course, achievement test should

reflect progress, not to expose weakness. It can also help us to decide on changes to future teaching programs where do most of students significantly worst in the test.

Finally, proficiency test is developed to give a general picture of a student's knowledge and ability. It is often used as a stage people have to reach if they want to be admitted to a tertiary education, get a job, or obtain a certificate (Harmer, 2008, p. 321). Furthermore, to make a good test, teachers, examiners, or testers should carefully take into consideration these following criteria, i.e. validity, reliability, and practicality. Without all of those characteristics, a test can be indubitably invalid, unreliable and impractical as well.

At first, a test can be said as valid if it tests what it is supposed to test. It is thus invalid, for instance, a test for writing skill with an essay question that requires a special knowledge in biology or physics. A particular kind of validity that concerns most is face validity. It means that the test should look, on its "face" or, in other words, its physical appearance, as if it is valid.

On the other hand, a good test should also be reliable. It means that the test should give consistent results. For example, a group of students take the

same test (twice) in two days, they get the same results on each. Practically, reliability is enhanced by making the test instructions clear, limiting the variety of the answers, making sure the test condition remains constant, and the objectivity and credibility of the test markers or scorers (Harmer, 2008, p. 322).

Last but not the least, despite the importance of two previous criteria of a good test, practicality should also be taken into account. A test that is very expensive, time-consuming, consists of too smaller or greater items, or requires any other impractical considerations, could be impractical, hence, it is a not good one (Setiawan, 2014, p. 4).

Eventually, there is always a potential for error when we measure something. Bachman and Palmer (1996) even believe that there is no such thing as a good test or bad test, or even such thing as the best test even for a certain situation.

National Examination

National Examination (*UN*) is a standard evaluation system of primary and secondary education. It is administered and conducted by the Center for Educational Assessment, The Ministry of Education and Culture, based on *Undang-Undang Republik Indonesia* of National Education System no. 20 year

2003 that stated, to control the quality of education nationwide to be evaluated as a form of accountability of educational providers to the parties concerned (Kemdikbud, 2011, p. 37).

Learning outcomes assessment at national level conducted by the government to assess the achievement of competence of graduates nationally on certain subjects in the group of subjects in science and technology, and performed in the form of a national examination. National Examination is conducted objectively, fair and accountable, and held at least once and at most twice in one school year (Mulyasa, 2009, p. 203).

National exam is a government's policy on education to determine the quality standards of education. This policy deals with the dynamic aspects, such as culture, socioeconomic conditions, political and even security that will always be vulnerable to the differences and controversies in line with the development of society. The policy is a political decision or political education, which concerns the interests of various parties, even within certain limits can be politicized for the sake of power.

National examinations performed, among others, to enforce the accountability of educational managers and providers to interested parties and the

public in general. Therefore, the *UN* must be able to provide complete and accurate information to the public about the achievements of each school as a whole. Information on the results of national examinations should allow all parties to know how the costs can be accounted for in the form of student learning achievement.

Almost all agreed on the need for education personnel test, to determine the effectiveness of various efforts made in the educational process, whether it has achieved satisfactory results or not. However, because the government sets the minimum value of the *UN* to be achieved by students, has caused some technical problems that are being questioned by many. These problems, among others, because of its national consideration, some subjects that are tested in *UN* are considered more important than other subjects so most efforts aimed at school only lead learners to achieve success in the exam. In fact, the material covers only *UN* intellectual aspects, which are not able to measure all aspects of education as a whole. In this case, there has been a narrowing of malpractice by the impression of the meaning and nature of education into the cognitive aspect only, i.e. to the limited subjects tested. Psychomotor, social,

emotional skills, or moral character, and spiritual aspects are neglected (Mulyasa, 2009, pp. 203—204).

The purpose of government is good, which is to boost the quality of education to establish a given minimum standard because the world standard of 6.0. So, it was natural that when the government sets. However, it is rolled out in the unstable condition of the people as it raised much misinterpretation, even rejection. People who do not accept *UN* cannot be blamed, because the government only setting the graduation standard without providing enough facilities and equipment. Supposedly, every policy followed by other sub-policies that support the implementation in the field, such as facilities, infrastructure, and laboratories, and also improve the teachers' professionalism.

These conditions often inhibit the quality of education, especially if government policy was only used as a kind of project which ended when funding ran out, so did the implementation.

Apart from the various limitations and weaknesses, the government has an interest through an assessment to determine the ability of various levels of education graduates in certain fields of study as an indicator of the success of the

education system. We also want to know the children's abilities in math, language, science, and so the least that can be captured through the *UN* and compared between regions, districts or cities, even between schools. Government's interest to know the results of a national education institution interest is not personal, yet it is a message of Law of National Education System No. 20 of 2003. Even, actually, the intent of the law is not just the *UN*, but concerns the performance evaluation of all components of the education system (Mulyasa, 2009, pp. 204—205).

UN serves as a quality control of the educational system, because the control of the educational input and process is already so limited, even when there is a centralized control center of education cannot be done completely, because the mental fragility of the bureaucratic network due to various factors beyond the issue of education. To that end, the government has freed *UN* costs for all schools (public and private), especially at the level of compulsory education. In this case, each student must attend one *UN* with no charge, and are entitled to repeat it if they have not yet graduated from an education unit.

Assessment by the government should not be only focused on outcomes

assessment, but also on the program or program assessment. Program assessment needs to be carried out by the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Departments of Education continuously and sustainably. Program assessment needs to be conducted to determine compliance with the Standards of National Education (SNE) with a basic, functions, and goals of national education, as well as compliance with the demands of society and the progress of time. In this case, the learning process as the implementation of the curriculum should be accountable to the user community of educational services through a thorough, systematic and continuous activities and process (Mulyasa, 2009, p. 206).

Humans as a core resource in education are no longer seen as free and independent. The objective of learning in schools as if it is simply formed to prepare and face the examination. Spirit of critical reasoning development of the students is constrained. Future expectations of the students seemed to be depended on a graduation rate only (Andyka, 2011, p. 53).

To mention a few, the death of a student after attending the *UN* because the stress of being not able to answer the questions could be an evidence of the negative impact of the *UN*. The common

practice of the school to add a list of “educational apostasy,” i.e. false answer key leakage that deliberately made by some irresponsible persons, and a bit of administrative problems, is the fact that often occurs in the field. Not to mention the appalling problems of the *UN* budget each year is estimated to reach Rp 540 billion (Andyka, 2011, p. 55).

In his book *Menggugat UN*, Prof. Hamid Hasan said that the quality of education is determined by a quality learning environment. Quality environment is formed by a variety of factors, including the factors of teaching facilities, learning interactions, learning materials, and learning atmosphere. It should be developed and directed that *UN* as one of the evaluation tools to collect data about the quality of education services (Andyka, 2011, p. 56).

UN is merely an educational quality and services mapping for each region in Indonesia. By mapping the visible picture of weakness, deficiency, and excess of national education, at its best function, it should act as a foundation for improving the quality of national education.

In this research, the writers focused on:

1. Was there any positive and/or negative washback of National Examination (*UN*) on teaching learning activities of

XII-grade students in East Ciputat, South Tangerang, Banten?

2. How were their beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and/or opinions towards National Examination (*UN*)?

The objectives of this study were as follows:

1. to find out if there was any positive and/or negative washback of National Examination (*UN*) on teaching learning activities of XII-grade students in East Ciputat, South Tangerang, Banten; and
2. to describe their beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and/or opinions towards National Examination (*UN*).

Hopefully, this study would give current and constructive contribution and understanding to teaching learning assessment and evaluation in Indonesia, especially in the context of National Examination (*UN*), and also to EFL teaching and testing in particular, either theoretically or practically.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a survey method. Here, researchers are often interested in the opinions of a large group of people about a particular topic or issue. They ask a number of questions, all related to the issue, to find answers. The three major characteristics that most surveys possess:

1. Information is collected from a group of people in order to describe some aspects or characteristics (such as abilities, opinions, attitudes, beliefs, and/or knowledge) of the population of which that group is a part.
2. The main way in which the information is collected is through asking questions; the answers to these questions by the members of the group constitute the data of the study.
3. Information is collected from a sample rather than from every member of the population (Fraenkel *et al.*, 2012, p. 393).

This research will be presented in qualitative and descriptive approach. According to Creswell (2003, p. 207), "This research is emergent (several aspects may emerge during the study), fundamentally interpretive, takes place in the natural setting, uses multiple methods and strategies of inquiry, uses complex reasoning, views social phenomena holistically, etc.

Setting of the Research

The writer selected a sample of 10 XII-grade students who have taken National Examination from some vocational senior high schools in East Ciputat such as SMK Triguna Utama, SMK YMJ and SMK Moh. Husni Thamrin, and constructed a questionnaire

designed to elicit their beliefs, attitudes, behaviors and/or opinions toward National Examination or UN. He gave the questionnaires to one of them and she spread it to their friends. After each of the students responded to the questionnaires, he gathered them to be analyzed and interpreted. Moreover, this study was conducted from July 1st to 10th, 2014.

Participants of the Research

The participants of the research were ten XII-grade students who have faced and passed National Examination in 2014 of three vocational senior high schools, i.e. SMK Triguna Utama, SMK YMJ and SMK Moh. Husni Thamrin, in East Ciputat, South Tangerang, Banten.

Instrument of the Research

The instrument used in this research was a questionnaire. Brown (2001) in D rnyei (2010, pp. 3—4) defined questionnaires as any written instruments that present respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they are to react either by writing out their answers or selecting from among existing answers.

The questionnaire used here is close-ended questions with multiple-choice answers consisted of 10 questions.

Technique of Data Collection

The writer conducted direct administration to a group method in collecting the data. Fraenkel *et al.* (2012, p. 396) explained that this method is used whenever a researcher has access to all (or most) of the members of a particular group in one place. The instrument is administered to all members of the group at the same time and usually in the same place.

Techniques of Data Analysis

After the questionnaire has been responded, there remains the final task of summarizing the responses in order to draw some conclusions from the results. The total size of the sample was reported, along with the overall percentage of returns. Finally, the percentage of the total sample responding for each item was also reported.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The writer follows Miles and Huberman's (1994, p. 14) steps in analyzing the data qualitatively. They are reducing the data by summarizing and choosing specific things, displaying the data and, finally, drawing conclusion of data findings. Below, the data gathered from the questionnaires that have responded by the participants of this research are as follows:

Table 1. Students' Responses to the Questionnaire related to Overall Teaching Learning Process in Facing *UN*

No.	Questions	Yes	Relative/ Do not know	No
1.	<i>UN</i> increases the intensity of students' learning.	9		1
4.	Teachers teach materials tested in <i>UN</i> .	10		
5.	Teachers give extra hours in facing <i>UN</i> .	10		
7.	<i>UN</i> improves teaching quality of teachers in the classroom.	3	7	
8.	<i>UN</i> creates effective and fun learning atmosphere in the classroom.	2	8	
9.	<i>UN</i> guarantees competent and qualified graduates.	2	6	2
10.	It is still necessary to conduct <i>UN</i> .	3	3	4

Table 2. Students' Responses to the Questionnaire related to Study Hours in Facing *UN*

No.	Questions	1 hour or less	2 hours	3 hours or more
2.	Students' study hours at home per day before <i>UN</i> .	5	3	2
3.	Students' study hours at home per day in facing <i>UN</i> .	1	5	4
6.	Extra hours at school per day in facing <i>UN</i> .	3	7	

From the data displayed above, we can see that almost all of the students

believe that National Examination (*UN*) can increase the intensity of students'

learning, in other words *UN* can motivate them to study harder and more intensely; all students admit that their teachers teach materials related to *UN* and the teachers give them extra hours so they can understand and master better the materials that will be tested in *UN*; most of the students think that *UN* can relatively improve teaching quality of teachers in the classroom, create effective and fun learning atmosphere in the classroom, and guarantee competent and qualified graduates; and, lastly, the most unique one is their opinions or perceptions towards *UN* are diverse, yet the majority, about 40% of them, agree that *UN* is not necessary anymore and therefore should be abolished due to some considerations.

Moreover, we can also notice that there is a significant increase of students' learning hours (activities) either at their homes or schools in facing National Examination (*UN*).

Finally, relating to the research questions proposed in chapter I, National Examination (*UN*) has indeed positive and negative washback on teaching learning activities of XII-grade students of some vocational senior high schools, i.e. SMK Triguna Utama, SMK YMJ and SMK Moh. Husni Thamrin, in East Ciputat, South Tangerang, Banten. Based

on the data analysis above, *UN* can boost students' motivation to study harder; they spend more time (than usual) to learn the lessons, especially those that are tested in *UN*; teachers give the materials related to *UN* and also give extra hours to the students so they can comprehend the materials well enough and, as a result, can answer the *UN* test items of each subjects are some of the positive washback of *UN*. Nevertheless, on the contrary, students' beliefs, opinions and/or perceptions toward *UN* in creating good and interesting teaching learning activities and guaranteeing competent graduates is much relative, either it means relatively good or bad or they merely don't know how useful and important *UN* is in creating and guaranteeing so aforementioned. Therefore, it can be perceived that it is one of the negative washback of *UN*. In addition, students' opinion and/or perception toward the importance of *UN* is varied considerably, but 40% of them think that it is unnecessary to be conducted. It could thus also undeniably interpret as the negative one.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that National Examination (*UN*) has positive and

negative washback on teaching learning activities of XII-grade students of some vocational senior high schools in East Ciputat, South Tangerang, Banten. The results of the data analysis and interpretation show that there are some positive washback of UN, such as boosting students' motivation to study, adding extra hours of learning, improving students' mastery of teaching materials, especially related to UN. Moreover, there are also negative ones, such as students' doubtful (relative) and negative beliefs, opinions and/or perceptions towards UN in creating good teaching learning process and activities, and, hence, the importance of UN in the future is still in question.

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