

# EXAMINATION WASHBACK ON TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESS

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## **Abstract**

*This study looks at the influence examinations/tests outcomes have on teaching and learning process (wash-back), especially on teachers' choice and use of teaching methods, selection and delivery of learning contents, as well as their perceptions of classroom instructions. 80 teacher-examiners are purposively sampled in a Lagelu Local Government Area of Oyo State. Researchers' self-constructed questionnaire is used for collection of data, and mean-calculation is adopted for analysis of data. The study reveals that Teachers' engagement in external examinations marking influences their choice and use of teaching method with mean of 2.55 and sd 1.20, the study also reveals that teachers' marking experience influence their selection and delivery of learning contents with mean of 2.6 and Sd 0.9, and impact of examination washback on classroom instruction with mean 2.63 and Sd 0.82. These findings reveal teachers who mark external examinations prioritize the said examinations' outcomes to effective teaching and learning, and this affects their choice of teaching methods, strategies and their of style of delivery of learning contents as well as their perceptions about an ideal classroom instruction, . In view of these findings, the study recommends that teachers should endeavour to follow religiously the sequence of learning topics/contents as prescribed in the subject syllabus, and also consider other factors for making choice of teaching methods, strategies and techniques aside high-stake examinations marking guides.*

**Key Words:** Examination, Wash back, High-stake tests, Positive and Negative Washback

## **Introduction**

### **Definition of examination**

Examination in the education system is a veritable tool for measuring students' academic achievements as well as the attainment of

learning objectives. It is a formal assessment structured to evaluate students' knowledge, skills, attitudes and abilities in a given subject or course of study. Conceived as assessment, Khanitar (2024) affirms that it is the process of testing and

making a judgment about someone's knowledge, and a practical form of measuring the competence of the student's learning objectives which are in three factors: knowledge, skills and attitude. Aside assessment of knowledge and learning outcomes at all levels of education, examination, also known as test determines certification and promotion, standardization and benchmarking, feedback for policy and curriculum development, and selection tool for employment and higher education. Tests are increasingly used throughout educational systems in most countries as basis to make important score-based decisions about test takers. Testing has the tendency to induce consequences for the intended participants because it remains a way of differentiating between and among individuals.

Notably, when tests are product-oriented or play a summative function, it is usually high-stake due to the fact that their outcomes significantly impact test-takers' future and potentially determine their educational opportunities, career paths and their ability to practice a profession. Thus high-stake decisions are made through students' performances in tests or examination. Students' performances in examinations are predetermined by the interconnectedness of testing, teaching and learning. Invariably, valid and reliable scores made by students are testaments of effective teaching and learning process, and at such, a good assessment is ideal. Meanwhile, a good assessment regime must be balanced, fair and unbiased in how it evaluates each student's engagement, and should provide diversity in assessment tasks to ensure that it can assess a broad range of learning outcomes, maintain student's engagement and involve them in learning activities that lead to higher order thinking and deeper understanding of contents

(Biggs & Tang, 2007 in Mulder & French, 2023). Taking cognizance of aforementioned attributes of a good assessment, the results or feedbacks of assessments, ideally, should serve as a checklist for teachers' appraisal of the efficiency of the input made in pedagogy, at such, students' tests or examinations have influence on the teaching and learning process.

The outcomes of examinations or tests in the school system have been used to adjudge the class teacher's productivity, and class teachers have never cease to make students' performances a reference point and a determinant to the quality of instruction they provide. This influence defines wash-back or back-wash. Yeny and Darmaliana (2016) argue that Backwash is commonly annotated with negative meaning within applied linguistics, and Wash-back has gained in currency, and is now generally accepted in the applied linguistics literature. The backwash effect (also known as the wash-back effect) is the influence that a test has on the way students are taught (teachers narrow teaching to what they planned to test). For a better conceptualization of the term, wash-back is adopted in this paper. Mesick (1996) cited in Wen and Chano (2024) describes wash-back as the extent to which the introduction and use of a test influence language and teachers to do things they would not otherwise do that promotes or inhibits language learning. This entails that test outcomes provide guidance and direction to teachers' lesson preparation and presentation. Hazaea and Tayeb (2018) affirm that it has given momentum to both the teacher and students in the context of going deeper into learning in order to pass the examination. Similarly, the relationship between teaching and examinations has attracted the attention of researchers such as Ahmed and Rao (2012), Xie, (2013), and Onaiba (2013).

According to these researchers, wash-back is conceived as an educational phenomenon that describes the influences of tests on teaching and learning. In other words, teachers change their methods and approaches to reflect test requirements (Amengual-Pizarro, 2009 and Stecher et al. 2004).

The importance attached to examinations or tests' results is so emphasized that the results are yardsticks for rating not only teachers' competence but the quality and standards of educational institutions. In this 21st century, tests results significantly impact the test-takers' future, and potentially determine their educational opportunities and career paths.

### **Concept of high stake test**

High-stakes tests have been used as a catalyst for change in order to encourage beneficial washback and curricular innovation, although its ramifications on teaching and learning may be negative (Shohamy, 2004). As a result, contemporary studies of washback in education focus on the impact of high stakes tests on educational stakeholders, especially when the tests undergo alterations, in aspects such as learning practices, teaching techniques, syllabus and behaviours towards tests (Qi, 2004; Saif, 2006; Tsagari, 2009). Evidence from Nigeria's classroom reveals that teaching is gradually centering on promotion examination questions, thus countermining good education. Sama, Adegbuyi, and Ani (2021) confirm that teaching activities that dominate the West African Senior Secondary Certificate Examination classrooms revolve around examination preparation of those content areas that might be examined in future examinations, thereby sacrificing the whole prescribed curriculum content at the expense of

students. Meanwhile, Shogbesan and Faleye (2016) propose teaching-to-the-test as an effective strategy for enhancement of students' learning, though it aimed at promotion of assessment for learning. The implication here is that teaching-to-the-test might have some influence on students' test scores and might not be an appropriate classroom instruction for students learning in Nigeria since, students' learning generally remain unchanged or decreased after high-stakes tests were implemented (Amrein and Berliner, 2002).

High-stakes testing appears to be a powerful force in shaping public opinion about the good standards and accountability of education (Amoako, 2019 & Anane, 2015). In most West African countries like Nigeria today, Anane (2025) emphasizes that tests like the West African Senior Certificate Examination (WASSCE) and National Examination Council (NECO) are becoming more and more high-stakes, because such examinations are used for determining the quality of Senior High Schools, school selection and placement into tertiary institutions and remedial classes respectively. Gradually, National Examinations are being openly or secretly related to plans that guide school systems, administrators, teachers and students (Anane, 2007). The scores of students in National tests, for instance, are published in the daily newspapers and other news portals as a medium of ensuring accountability to the public.

In the same vein, Linn (2010) adds that high-stake tests, sometimes known as standardized tests, serves as the basis for holding schools, teachers, and students more accountable. Parents' choices of their wards' enrolment into secondary schools especially in Oyo State is dependent on the quality of WAEC

and NECO results ( number of As and Bs) the schools with their locations make. Invariably, the degree of successes of candidates in WASSCE and NECO is held in high esteem. Proprietors of private Senior High Schools attach promotions and increase in salaries of teachers to the number of students who do well in achievement examinations because of the importance attached to students “overall performance (Adesina, 2017). The importance attached to students’ performance has not only affected the treatment given to teachers but also determines teachers’ priorities in pedagogy. An investigation on the effect of high-stakes testing on curriculum implementation and instruction in secondary schools in Ghana according to Anane (2007) reveals that high-stakes testing has not resulted in improved quality of teaching and learning as teachers spend 28% of class time preparing students for tests. In the same vein, Amoako (2018) observes that Basic Education Certificate Examination (BECE) as a high-stakes test drives curriculum implementation in Ghana, and puts the “national curriculum” and “teaching practices” at stake.

### **Positive and negative washback**

Significantly, washback effect which is the outcome of a test or an examination could either result in positive or in a negative way. Positive wash-back occurs when there is harmony between teaching and students' examination or class tests' performance. It also occurs in a situation where the information from examination clearly indicates areas of strength and weakness for each learner, and teachers can use the information to institute necessary intervention strategies aimed at promoting learning in the classroom. A good example is perceived if examination feedback indicates high content

mastery with respect to handling of abstract concept but noticeably low performance in the area of concrete application of the concepts. At such, teachers can respond to this shortcoming by modifying their instructional delivery practices to address the identified areas of need. On the other hand, negative wash-back effect occurs when there is a nexus between the curriculum objectives and the focus of the test. It could be experienced when the nature and content of the examination lead teachers to concentrate on topics that regularly appear in the examination. In such a situation, learners are only exposed to regularly tested subject matter and do not have the opportunity to acquire relevant skills related to objectives not tested. This has essentially resulted in a situation where content in the syllabus is significantly trimmed and emphasis is more on memorization of facts rather than assisting learners to develop critical thinking skills. However, if the examinations are not testing these goals, students, who usually have their sights set on the examination, may pass the tests but totally fail to attain the basic goals set by educational planners.

There is no doubt about the effect of examination washback on both the students and the teachers. Tsagari (2006) in a study reveals that students’ feelings, perceptions, attitudes and motivation towards language learning are influenced by the English test. In the same vein, Rahman et. al (2021), from a review of other researchers’ works, report that tests affect teachers’ feelings, perceptions and attitudes towards their behaviours and classroom practices in a manner that it becomes stressful to them and lowers their morale or else, inspire teachers to work tougher and embrace innovative techniques and methods to meet the intended objectives of the test. The authors

further reveal that significant negative washback of the school examinations exist in teachers' teaching-learning styles, teaching contents, methods and approaches, and classroom practices. However, Rahman et. al (2021) established the following as remote causes of washback in the school system: teachers' attitudes towards tests, lack of congruence between the objectives of the curriculum and the format of the test, teachers' lack of comprehensive understanding about the curriculum, and pressure from guardians of the students to ensure good grades in the final examination.

Bachman and Palmer, (1996) declare that the effect operate at micro level and macro level. At the micro-level, it affects the language learning and teaching in a classroom context (Hakim, 2018); while at the macro-level, it influences the entire education system, ranging from curriculum design to administration (Chan, 2018). Despite all these categorizations, washback is most often studied within the positive-negative dichotomy in which different stakeholders are involved. Based on the positive-negative dichotomy, Green (2007) creates a model to explain how positive or negative washback is generated from a test. The author believes that there are two elements in a test: the focal construct and the test characteristics. The former is what the curriculum designers' desire in delivering (what the test originally wants to provide for the students) and the latter is what is exactly assessed in the test, including the content, test format, complexity of tasks, etc.

Comparatively, positive washback is achieved when the two ideas are overlapped to a great extent; in other words, the test reflects the

focal construct as understood by the course provider and learners; whereas negative washback is created if there is only little (or no) overlapping on the two ideas. Invariably, it is an undeniable fact that positive washback results in a motivated learning and teaching environment where learners acquire what is essential with joy, and teachers transmit knowledge to students without much pressure whereas negative washback leads to a distorted learning environment in that all the participants taught based tests washback suffer when the test instrument varies.. In view of the above, this paper seeks to find out how teachers manage washback especially those who are involved in assessment of achievement examinations like West African Senior Secondary School Certificate Examinations and National Examination Council of Nigeria. Specifically, this study pays attention to the extent at which washback determine teachers' choice and use of teaching methods and strategies, learning contents, and perceptions about class instruction..

### **Research Questions**

1. To what extent does teachers' engagement in external examination marking affect their choices and use of teaching methods?
2. To what extent does teachers' assessment experience influence the selection and delivery of learning contents?
3. What is the impact of wash-back on teachers' perceptions of class instruction?

### Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will draw the attention of schools' proprietors, school administrators and other stakeholders in education to the dimension of examination washback and how external examination influence the teaching and learning process. which prioritizes cognitive development. Other aspects like affective and psychomotor oriented development should be considered Class teachers will also be exposed to the intricacies of washback in pedagogy which could reawaken their consciousness about pursuing the attainment of comprehensive subject curriculum goals via instructional objectives

### Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey method. It was carried out in Lagelu Local Government Area

of Oyo State Southwestern Nigeria. Teachers who examine external examinations (WASSCE and NECO) in eight secondary schools were purposively. A total of 80 teachers from eight secondary schools, ten teachers from each school that teach SS3, 32 male teachers and 48 female teachers was sampled using researchers' self-administered 4-point likert-structured questionnaire for collection of data. Test-retest reliability method was adopted to establish the reliability coefficient of 0.72 on the instrument using Cronbach Alpha. Data collected were analyzed using a criterion mean of 2.5 as the basis of taking decision about acceptance and rejection of the responses from the respondents ( < 2.5 rejection of the statement, >= 2.5 acceptance of the statement )

### Results

**Question 1:** To what extent does teachers' engagement in external examination marking affects their choices and uses of teaching methods?

**Table 1: Teachers' engagement in external examinations marking and their choices and uses of teaching method**

	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Standard Deviation
I sometimes change my methods of teaching to reflect SSCE requirements.	32	25	14	9	2..85	1.07
Methods and techniques I employ in teaching become more "test-like" in the third year than second and first years.	24	48	4	4	2.53	0.74
My teaching strategies and techniques are guided by external examination bodies marking scheme	16	44	12	8	2.55	0.90
I encourage my students to memorize some concepts for exam purpose	20	28	20	12	2.25	1.06
<b>Overall</b>					2.55	1.20

*Note: N = 80, Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)*

The mean scores of all the statements in table 1 are above the criterion mean score (2.5) as well as their overall mean (2.55) and standard deviation of 1.20. This suggests that the methods, strategies and techniques adopted by the subject teachers during class instructions are determined by the high-stake examination marking/ assessment guides. Teachers, through their responses, affirm that every procedure in the class should be based on achieving the high stake examination demands.

**Question 2:** To what extent does teachers’ marking experience influence selection and delivery of learning contents?

Table 2: **Influence of teachers’ marking experience on selection and delivery of learning contents**

	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Standard deviation
I sometimes skip some topics and contents because they are unlikely to be tested in examination.	10	28	12	30	2.55	0.91
My concentration on WAEC and NECO past questions during teaching has tremendously boosted my students’ performance in my subject area	26	32	8	14	2.15	0.86
The scope of the learning contents I cover in my subject is not usually determined by WAEC/NECO past questions’ coverage	26	36	8	10	3.10	0.96
<b>Overall</b>					<b>2.6</b>	<b>0.91</b>

Note: N = 80, Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)

A comparison of the mean scores of Teachers’ responses in table 2 with the criterion mean score of 2.5 and standard deviation of 0.91, reveals that they focus on topics and learning contents that are regularly assessed by high-stake examination boards (WAEC and NECO) however their scope of coverage on the chosen topics goes beyond the examination boards’ choice of test items. In order words, school teachers prioritize high-stake examination demands to the expense of the subject curriculum.

**Question 3:** What is the impact of wash-back on teachers' perceptions of class instruction?

**Table 3: Impact of wash-back on teachers' perceptions of class instruction**

	SA	A	D	SD	Mean	Standard Deviation
I do not waste time giving too much explanations to some concepts in class rather I focus on scoring points	20	30	20	10	1.90	0.59
There is no need dwelling on contents/topics that have not been featuring in external examination questions for years ago.	16	44	14	6	1.53	0.51
Passing external examinations is my priority in every class instruction	12	34	20	14	2.05	0.96
						0.63
I only expose my students to key points that will enable them pass examinations	20	20	24	16	1.63	
<b>Overall</b>					<b>2.63</b>	<b>0.82</b>

*Note: N = 80, Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), Strongly Disagree (1)*

The mean scores of statements in table 3 and their average mean score of 2.63 and standard deviation of 0.82 are above the criterion mean of 2.5 and standard deviation criterion of 0.5 and this confirms that subject teachers perceived class instructions as a means to pass high-stake examination. Students' educational achievements/development according teachers are determined by the scores/grades the make in high-stake examinations results.

The results of the study as shown in the tables above reveal that examination wash-back has influence on subject teachers' choice and application of teaching methods during class instructions; it also determines the priority

teachers give while selecting lesson topics/contents, as well as their perceptions of the entire classroom instructions. All these indicates that teachers prioritize high stake examinations question items to all round and comprehensive development of the learners. The results align with the position of Rahman et.al (2021) that significant negative washback of school examination exists in the teachers' teaching-learning styles, teaching contents, methods and approaches, and classroom practices. Sama, Adegbuyi and Ani (2021) buttress the findings as a sacrifice of the whole prescribed curriculum content at the expense of students. The results also give justification to



Anane's (2007) revelation that high-stakes testing has not resulted in improved quality of teaching and learning as teachers spend 28% of class time preparing students for tests. The findings tend to crystallize teachers' over-dependence on test results as a key determinant to their instructional designs which has not only shaped their attitudes to tests or examinations but the attitudes of students and school authorities.

### Conclusion

It is true that examinations/tests measure learners' achievement levels in a given programme of studies, especially external or high stake examinations, this study reveals that teachers who are involved in marking of high stake examination choose their teaching method based on the examination the students are being prepared for, also, it shows that the selection and the delivery of lesson outcome is determined by examination preparation, subject teachers should not be overtaken by the envisaged or predicted test items, teachers should give credence to the implications of wash-back on teaching and learning, and see the effective implementation of curriculum as a process that requires cognitive, affective and psychomotor development of the learners not for mere passing of examinations.

### Recommendations

1. Subject teachers should realize that no one-shot examination/test, especially a high stake/external examination, can test all the prescribed contents in the syllabus. Thus they should endeavour to follow religiously the sequence of contents prescribed for students.
2. Examination boards like WAEC and NECO should adopt proper random sampling of examinable topics, as this will make teachers' predictions a bit difficult, and at the same time reduce their subjective choices of teachable topics/contents.
3. Teachers should not narrow their choices of teaching methods, strategies and techniques only to what the high stake examination marking guides suggest, rather they should consider other factors like learners' characteristics, learning contents and their recommended as well as other attainable instructional objectives.
4. Other assessment measures should be prioritized at schools and workplaces as a means of determining students or candidates learning abilities and potentials to reduce the degree of stakes given to tests and examination.

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