

# Washback Effects Of Exams On English Language Learning: An Analysis Of PEC English Question Papers In Pakistan

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## Abstract

Washback effect is the impact that tests have on teaching and learning, and are instructions to the notion that test should drive learning (Sohamy,1993). In Pakistan it has generally been observed that the exams papers do not assess and evaluate English language skills of the learners. The current study has analyzed the content of the English question papers of 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade of PEC, identified the language skills that are assessed in these English papers and investigated the washback effects of these question papers on the learning of English language of 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students. By employing quantitative research methods, the data for the study was collected in two modes that included five years i.e. 2014 – 2018 PEC English exam question papers of grade 5 and 8 and a survey of the washback effects of these exam via a close-ended questionnaire. The questions in the exam papers of PEC were analyzed as per the dimensions in Bloom's Taxonomy, whereas, the data obtained via the close-ended questionnaires was statistically analyzed. The study has revealed that in both 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade PEC English exam papers primary focus is on developing two levels of learning i.e. knowledge, and application that develop rote-learning thus become impediment in using English language in meaningful contexts. PEC English exam papers only test the reading and writing skills that have negative washback effects on the linguistic competence of the learners. In English, as a second language in Pakistan, learners need to be tested for all the skills, as the testing of only reading and writing and neglecting the testing of listening and speaking results in partial language learning.

**Key Words:** Washback effect, PEC, English Papers, Bloom's Taxonomy, and Linguistic Competence.

## I. Introduction:

It is thought that the only criterion for judging learning is the examination results, as students for the next grades are selected on the basis of the examination. Exams are not only important for evaluation purposes rather these can also, 'influence the attitude, behavior and motivation of the teachers, learners and parents'. (Pearson,1998; p.98). Alderson and Walls (1993) illustrated that testing affects

teaching and learning, thus, are powerful determiners about the happening in the classroom. Sometimes testing creates negative impact on the learning process and some time it makes healthy and positive environment. (Hughes, 1989). For Sposlky (1990), exams always have powerful influence on the learners by affecting their conceptual domain. Pearson (1998) says that public examinations influence the attitude, behavior and motivation of the

teachers, learners and parents. Swain (1985) states that it has been frequently noted that if a teacher knows the content of a test or the format of a test, he will teach his Students accordingly.

It has been categorically seen that students who have passed 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade exams under the umbrella of Punjab Examination Commission (PEC) are unable to manifest the optimum linguistic proficiency in using English language. They have linguistic deficiencies in using English both in oracy as well literacy skills. Judging their linguistic competence as per Bloom's taxonomy (1956), it can be observed that they even do not have good knowledge of English due to which they have deficient comprehension, thus have unsatisfactory application in using English in different domains. This situation is quite alarming and needs attention. Therefore, it is necessary to investigate the role of exams in facilitating English language learning. If the exams and papers of English do not facilitate the learning environment in English classrooms, then there is a dire need for revising assessment and evaluation tools in exams. With these objectives, the current study has analyzed the content of the English question papers of 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade of PEC, identified the language skills that are assessed in these English papers and investigated the washback effects of these question papers on the learning of English language of 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students.

## 2. Literature Review

Washback effect is the impact that tests have on teaching and learning. Washback effect are instructions to the notion that test should drive learning (Sohamy,1993). For Pierce (2002) Washback effects can be referred to as the effect of test on the classroom pedagogy, curriculum development and educational policy. Cohen (1994) refers it as a phenomenon

that manifests the effects of assessment instruments on educational policies and beliefs. For Bachman and Palmer (1996) Washback is a subset of assessment's impact on society, individual and education system on both macro and micro level. For Messik (1996) Washback effects link learning with the outcomes. It also links validity and reliability to practicality in a balance (Hughes,1989). Cheng (1997) says that washback is an active intended curriculum change by means of the change of public exams. For Pearson (1998) washback effects, "will persuade teachers and learners to pay serious attention to communicative skills and teaching-learning activities that are more likely to be helpful in the development of such skills." For Oller (1979) Washback is not a single and unique phenomenon but it is also taken as one of the main characteristics of a good test. Lam (1994) used Alderson and Walls (1993) hypothesis and find out different types of washback effects that includes timetable washback, methodology washback, attitude washback, proofreading washback, textbook washback, content washback and performance washback.

With the beginning of the communicative language testing, washback has become more attractive as an instrument of evaluating students' performance in the post exam scenario. Washback effects depend upon the nature of the exam; therefore, affects learners in multiple ways. Fullilove (1992) conducted research on Washback effects in Hong Kong and identified the effects of exams as one of the components in formal academics that have large scale implications on the learners' overall performance namely: what and how learners learn, the rate and sequence of learning, and the degree and depth of learning. Bailey (1996) suggests that the washback effects of language exam has a direct impact on learning vocabulary, grammar rules, and target language

conversation. Alderson and Walls (1993) in Sri Lanka, and Ingulsrud (1994) in Japan even identified the financial implications of exams on the students' future prospects. Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, and Ferman (1996) in Israel researched the washback effects of ASL (Arabic as a second language) test and EFL (English as a foreign language) test and illustrated their effects on Jobs opportunities in future.

Punjab Examination Commission (PEC), established in 2006, is an autonomous body arranging exams of grade 5 to grade 8 of around 2 to 5 million students every year throughout the province Punjab in Pakistan. PEC sets its papers according to Bloom's taxonomical SLOs i.e. knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Whereas, the emphasis of the exam is mainly on the first three levels of Bloom's taxonomy i.e. knowledge, comprehension, and application. PEC, from time to time, analyze students' performance on the basis of SLOs. In the current study questions in English papers of 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grades of PEC are analyzed as per the levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, and their washback effects on learning English as a second language are identified.

Years	Total Marks	Marks Knowledge based Questions	Marks Comprehension based Questions	Marks Application based Questions
2018	100	48	17	35
2017	100	37	18	45
2016	100	50	15	35
2015	100	48	12	40
2014	100	54	6	40
Total	500	237	68	195
% age		47.4%	13.6%	39%

**Table. 01:** Question-wise marks as per Bloom's Taxonomy in 5<sup>th</sup> grade English papers of PEC

In the above table, it can be observed that a large portion of PEC English papers consist of knowledge level i.e. 47.4 % of the total

### 3. Methodology

By employing quantitative research methods, the data for the study was collected in two modes. First mode of the data collection included last five years i.e. 2014 – 2018 PEC English exam question papers of grade 5 and 8. Whereas, the second mode of data collection included a survey conducted through close ended questionnaire for inquiring the washback effects of the exam. The data of the questionnaire was obtained from a sample of 50 students via Simple Random Sampling (Hayes, 2020) that included the students from grade 5 and 8 both in the government and private schools. The questions in the exam papers of PEC were analyzed as per the dimensions in Bloom's Taxonomy, whereas, the data obtained via the close ended questionnaires was statistically analyzed.

### 4. Analysis and Discussion

#### 4.1. Analysis of Bloom's Taxonomical Level of Learning in the PEC English Papers of 5<sup>th</sup> Grade:

The following table represents the quantitative analysis of the questions as per Bloom's Taxonomical levels of learning in PEC English papers for 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

questions. It included 48 marks questions in 2018, 37 marks questions in 2017, 50 marks questions in 2016, 48 marks

questions in 2015, and 54 marks questions in 2014 respectively. Most of the knowledge-based questions in these papers were objective type. Such questions require the basic level in language learning as the students have to only memorize and cram from a particular source. At 5<sup>th</sup> grade, the students only have a fixed source i.e. an English textbook, thus, develop in them the habit of 'Rote-Learning' (Hilgard & Irvine, 1953). For Schunk (2008) 'Rote-learning' depends on the habit of relying on a fixed content and develops the cramming practice in the learners. It is beneficial for learning different subjects, as the basic concepts in different subjects requires the recalling of the content. However, in the context of language learning, too much reliance on rote-learning can hamper creativity that is pre-requisite for developing the generative aspects in using language in communicative events.

Application-based questions in the papers were 39%. It included 35 marks questions in 2018, 45 marks questions in 2017, 35 marks questions in 2016, and 40 marks questions both in 2015 and 2014 question papers. These questions tested learners' competence in using English language. Whereas, comprehension-based questions were on 13.6%, that is quite low as compared to knowledge and application-

based questions. In 2018 papers comprehension-based questions were of 17 marks, 18 marks in 2017, 15 marks in 2016, 12 marks in 2015 and only 06 marks in 2014. The comparative analysis clearly manifests that preference in setting questions was dominantly given to knowledge-based questions complemented by application-based questions; with very small ration of comprehension-based questions. Rest of the three levels synthesis, analysis and evaluation do not become a part of the paper at grade 5. Though at grade 5, learners may not be justifiably tested for these skills due to the age and competence level; however, increasing the ration of comprehension-level can surely bring positive washback effects in the comprehensible output in English language. The questions in all the papers only were related to testing reading and writing skills. Whereas, all skills need to be developed from the early stage of second language acquisition.

#### 4.2. Analysis of Bloom's Taxonomical Level of Learning in the PEC English Papers of 8<sup>th</sup> Grade:

The following table represents the quantitative analysis of the questions as per Bloom's Taxonomical levels of learning in PEC English papers for 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Years	Total Marks	Marks Knowledge based Questions	Comprehension based Questions	Application based Questions	Synthesis based Questions
2018	100	39	11	50	
2017	100	38	12	50	
2016	100	41.5	16.5	42	
2015	100	37.5	16.5	36	10
2014	100	48	22	30	
Total	500	204	78	208	10
% age		40.8%	15.6%	41.6%	2%

**Table. 02:** Question-wise marks as per Bloom's Taxonomy in 8<sup>th</sup> grade English papers of PEC

In the above table, it can be observed for grade 8, PEC English papers consist of

knowledge level i.e. 40.8 % of the total questions. It included 39 marks questions in

2018, 38 marks questions in 2017, 41.5 marks questions in 2016, 37.5 marks questions in 2015, and 48 marks questions in 2014 respectively. Most of the knowledge-based questions in these papers were objective type. Such questions require the basic level in language learning as the students have to only memorize and cram from a particular source i.e. an English textbook of grade 8, thus, develop the habit of 'Rote-Learning' (Hilgard & Irvine, 1953). Application-based questions in the papers were 41%. It included 50 marks questions in 2018, 50 marks questions in 2017, 42 marks questions in 2016, and 36 marks questions in 2015 and 30 marks in 2014. Whereas, comprehension-based questions were 15.6%, that is gain quite low as compared to knowledge and application-based questions. In 2018 papers comprehension-based questions were of 11 marks, 12 marks in 2017, 16.5 marks in 2016, 16.5 marks in 2015 and 22 marks in 2014. PEC has also included a synthesis-based question of only 10 marks in 2015.

The comparative analysis clearly manifests that preference in setting questions knowledge-based and application-based questions were included almost with the

same ration; yet, the ration of comprehension-based questions were very low. At grade 8, comprehension-based questions need to be included with higher ration as learners at this stage are expected to have the optimum level of competence in the use of English language. Rest of the two levels analysis and evaluation do not become a part of the paper at grade 8. This again will impede the positive washback effects of exam on the use of the English language by the learners. Learners in grade 8 have the age in which they can deal with analysis and evaluative aspects of English language; therefore, including some questions of these dimensions will surely develop their linguistic competence. The questions in all the papers only were related to testing reading and writing skills. This again is one of the gray areas that paper setters need to review as including some questions that can also test listening and speaking skills will have positive washback effects in developing oral competence in the learners.

#### 4.3. Analysis of the Data from the Questionnaire

The following table represents the statistical analysis of the data obtained from the close-ended questionnaire.

S.No	Close-ended Questions		Options		
			To a great extent بہت زیادہ حد تک متفق	To some extent کچھ حد تک متفق	Not at all بالکل اتفاق نہیں
1	Do you use pattern papers for preparation? کیا آپ پیٹرن پیپر تیاری کیلئے استعمال کرتے ہیں؟	<b>Responses</b>	18	28	04
		<b>% age</b>	33%	56%	8%
2	Are you conscious about your result? کیا آپ اپنے نتیجہ کے بارے فکر مند رہتے ہیں؟	<b>Responses</b>	48	02	00
		<b>% age</b>	96%	04%	00%
3		<b>Responses</b>	00	06	44

	Purpose of study is to pass exams only. پڑھائی کا مقصد صرف امتحان پاس کرنا ہے۔	% age	00%	12%	88%
4	Present examination system has improved students' communicative competencies موجودہ نظام تعلیم نے طلبا و طالبات میں رابطہ کی استعداد بڑھادی ہے۔	Responses	18	25	07
		% age	36%	50%	14%
5	Do you feel pressure of exams? کیا آپ امتحانات کا دباؤ محسوس کرتے ہیں؟	Responses	26	14	10
		% age	52%	28%	20%
6	PEC exams will affect your life. پی ای سی کے امتحانات آپ کی زندگی پر اثر انداز ہوں گے۔	Responses	34	10	06
		% age	68%	20%	12%
7	Listening and speaking skills are given importance. سننے اور بولنے کی صلاحیت پر زور دیا جاتا ہے۔	Responses	25	17	08
		% age	50%	34%	16%
8	Are you aware of the Levels of learning? کیا آپ تعلم کے مراحل سے آگاہ ہیں	Responses	14	27	09
		% age	28%	54%	18%
9	Memorizing the lessons is most important to pass exams. (Knowledge;first level of learning) امتحان پاس کرنے کے لیے صرف یاد کرنا ضروری ہے۔	Responses	08	25	17
		% age	16%	50%	34%
10	Understanding the concepts is necessary. (Comprehension;second level) کانسپٹ کو سمجھنا ضروری ہے۔	Responses	33	16	01
		% age	66%	32%	02%
11	PEC papers are difficult. پی ای سی کے پیپرز مشکل ہوتے ہیں۔	Responses	14	35	01
		% age	28%	70%	02%
12	Writing skills are promoted to attempt the PEC papers. پی ای سی کے پیپرز کے لیے لکھنے کی صلاحیت میں اضافہ کیا جاتا ہے۔	Responses	27	21	02
		% age	54%	42%	04%
13	PEC English papers help to improve English language learning. پی ای سی کے انگریزی کے پیپرز انگریزی زبان سیکھنے میں مدد کرتے ہیں۔	Responses	18	26	06
		% age	36%	52%	12%
14		Responses	42	08	00

	English language learning is necessary for improvement in life. انگریزی زبان سیکھنا زندگی میں بہتری کے لیے ضروری ہے۔	% age	84%	16%	00%
15	There are some tactics to pass English papers. انگلش پیپر پاس کرنے کے لیے کچھ حربے استعمال ہوتے ہیں۔	Responses	22	26	02
		% age	44%	52%	04%

**Table. 03.** Statistical Analysis of the Questionnaire

As mentioned in the methodology section that a survey was also conducted by distributing a closed-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire included 15 questions, designed to inquire the washback effects of the English exam of PEC. The statistical analysis of the responses of the questionnaire in the above table clearly manifest that learner of even grad 5 and 8 are very anxious about their exam and even a lot of them also use paper pattern for guidance and preparation. However, 88% of the responded that the purpose of studying English is not only to pass exam. This shows that even learners at such tender age know the importance and requirement of English in Pakistan. they study English with the dominant expectation to learn and use it comprehensively. Most of them are of the opinion that PEC exam has improved their English language skills; however, some of the respondents did not agree and responded negatively that in part shows the awareness of some learners about the washback effects of language exam at this age. Most them stressed on the importance of PEC exam in their future prospects, and referred to knowledge level as a much needed component of learning at this level. However, they also stressed on the development of comprehension skills in English. This means that, due to the less emphasis on comprehension-based skills in PEC exam paper, learner face difficulty in understanding as well as using English in a meaningful manner. According to Haynes (2007) for the effective use of second language, learners need to develop the

comprehension in the use of that language. As PEC exam does not significantly judge the comprehension of the learners that will have negative washback effects on the learners in using English in future.

The responded also asserted that the emphasis of writing skills in PEC exam is mostly on passing the paper which means that learners are unable to utilize the writing skills in the real life context. This refers to a very serious negative washback effects of this exam as the preparation of the exam does not develop their actual writing skills in English. Though, a lot of respondents agree that PEC exam develops their English language skills; however, their inability to utilize those skills outside the exam context refers to the limitations of the exercise that are included in the paper. A lot of the respondents agree to the fact that they use differently strategies and tactics to pass the exam. This shows that the tactics used for only passing the exam impede their actual language learning. This aspect of the exam paper need to be also considered by the paper setters in PEC, as exam in language testing needs not to be primarily based on passing the paper only. If students utilize their time in following the tactics to pass the exam the positive wash back effects of language testing can never be achieved.

## 5. Conclusion

The study has revealed that in both 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade PEC English exam papers primary focus is on developing two levels of learning i.e. knowledge, and application.

Whereas, the development of comprehension skills in English language has given secondary preference in setting exam questions. Though knowledge and application are important in language learning; however, mainly focusing in only these two levels can impede the development of other skills in English language. The large number of questions focusing on knowledge and application develop rote-learning which can never facilitate the development of actual linguistic competence in the use of language in the communicative events. The papers setters need to increase the number of questions related to comprehension level as through comprehension meaningful application of English language can be guaranteed in the students' linguistic behavior. Alongside, the testing of listening and speaking skills need to be also made a part of the exam, as the assessment of only reading and writing can only partially develop English language skills in the learners. The focus of the papers on only reading and writing skills incline the learners to use different paper passing tactics that in a sense itself indulge the learners in wrong pedagogical practices. Such wrong pedagogical practices have negative washback effects on language learning. The study has also surveyed the washback effects of PEC English question papers that too are not very encouraging. Since, the middle level in formal education is a crucial time for developing the basis of the learners; therefore, optimum care should be given to exams and their outcomes. The findings of the study recommend the need for revising English exam papers of PEC. In English, as a second language in Pakistan, learners need to be tested for all the skills, as the testing of only reading and writing and neglecting the testing of listening and speaking results in partial language learning.

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