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# The Learner Factor in Washback Context: An Empirical Study Investigating the Washback of the IELTS Academic Writing Test

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## **Bio Data:**

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## **Abstract**

This study sought to explore the perspectives of learners involved in the IELTS Academic Writing Module courses. In particular, the study explored learner perspectives of motivation, test-taking anxiety, test-taking strategies, and the expectations students bring to their courses. This study adopted a mixed methodology and collected data through questionnaires, observations, and interviews. A Multivariate Test for Repeated Measures was run to compare group means of this study at two various points in time with an interval of eight weeks in between. The results didn't indicate a statistically significant difference for the within-subjects variable of learners' perspectives, meaning that the learner perspectives' mean and change from one time to another was not noticeably significant. Further, classroom observations revealed that learners' perspectives toward the exams were not similar as they were both positive and negative, indicating that their views and practices differed. In addition, the interview demonstrated that every learner, to varying degrees, reported focusing on different tasks and activities that were included in the tests with varying behavioral patterns and perspectives, indicating a complex relationship between exams and learners' perspectives. However, Analysis of Covariance revealed significant effects for IELTS Writing Preparation course and the learners' improvements in their Writing scores.

*Keywords:* Washback, IELTS AWM, writing assessment, test preparation, learner washback, learner perspective

### **Introduction**

It is an undoubted belief in the educational system that testing should serve the needs of teaching. Bachman (1990, p. 279) points out that tests “are virtually always intended to serve the needs of an educational system.” Language testing, in Davies’ words, “provides goals for language teaching, and it monitors, for both teachers and learners, success in reaching those goals” (1990, p. 1).

However, the functions of tests in reality are far more beyond the intrinsic role as evaluation instrument, or the practical part as information resources for pedagogical refinement. As Davies notes, a test is “so potent in influence, so salient a presence, deserves much closer attention and study than it typically receives” (1990, p. 1). Washback is thus grounded in the relationship between preparation for success on a test and preparation for success beyond the test, in the domain to which the test is intended to generalize and to which it may control access.

Language learners are the key participants whose lives are most directly influenced by language testing washback. However, there is relatively little research that documents their point of view or their washback-related behavior before and after tests. Some researchers (see, e.g., Cohen, 1984) have reported on what students say about actually taking tests, but more information is needed about learner washback. Furthermore, the majority of the studies on washback have focused on TOEFL contexts. Despite washback researches in language programs, washback in IELTS writing preparation classrooms in Iran has not been significantly researched, nor has it been researched with focus on the learner perspectives. Therefore, a major void in our understanding of learner washback in language pedagogy exists.

### **Review of the Related Literature**

This study explores the influence of learner perspectives preparing for a test of academic writing, the IELTS Academic Writing Module. Writing is a key skill for international students at university as it is most often the basis for assessing their work and so plays a key role in academic success. The IELTS is a high-stakes gate keeping test used by universities to screen applicants for language ability. Between 1995 and 2005 the number of candidates rose from under 50,000 to over half a million per year (International English Language Testing System, 2005). The rapid expansion of the test has brought with it increased demand for test preparation books and courses. Performance on the test may have serious implications for the life chances of test takers. Hence, IELTS might be expected to exert a strong influence on learner and teacher behavior.

The academic module of the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) is designed to assess the readiness of candidates to study through the medium of English and is widely used as a selection tool by universities and other educational institutions. The academic writing component of the test requires candidates to complete two writing tasks within 60 min (the task instructions advise them to spend 20 min on Task 1 and 40 min on Task 2). Candidates are advised to write at least 150 words for Task 1 and 250 words for Task 2. Task 1 involves

transferring information from a diagram or graph. According to the *IELTS Handbook* (International English Language Testing System, 2005, p. 8), this task may require candidates to “organize, present and possibly compare data; describe the stages of a process or procedure; describe an object or event or sequence of events; explain how something works.” Task 2 calls on prior knowledge in the construction of a “written argument or case.” The *IELTS Handbook* suggests that the task requires candidates to “present the solution to a problem; present and justify an opinion; compare and contrast evidence, opinions and implications; evaluate and challenge ideas, evidence or an argument.”

In the field of education, there is a general consensus that tests especially high-stakes tests have an influence on teaching and learning. Such influence is often referred to as washback in language education. However, there is always a counterargument about whether the power of testing is beneficial or detrimental to educational practices. In addition, Alderson and Wall (1993) emphasize the fact that evidence of washback is typically demonstrated in behavioral and attitudinal changes in learners and teachers that are associated with the introduction of tests bearing important educational consequences.

Undoubtedly, learners are key participants whose lives are most directly affected by tests. As Bachman and Palmer (1996) suggest, test takers can be affected by three aspects of testing procedure: (1) the experience of taking and of preparing for the test, (2) the feedback they receive about their performance on the test, and (3) the decisions that may be made about them on the basis of their test scores (p. 31). Much more research is needed, however, to see whether and how these washback effects play out in the attitudes and behavior of language learners.

As mentioned above, washback may affect learners’ actions and/or their perceptions, and such perceptions may have wide-ranging consequences. Sturman (2003) used a combination of qualitative and quantitative data to investigate students’ reactions to registration and placement procedures at two English-language schools in Japan. The placement procedures included a written test and an interview. He found that the students’ perceptions of the accuracy of the placement process (i.e., the face validity of the results) were statistically associated with their later satisfaction with the school, the teachers, and the lessons (1996, p. 347).

As Hughes (1993) has pointed out, the key question about the products of washback is whether or not it leads to learning (i.e. language learning). Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996), in a study of TOEFL preparation courses in the United States, interviewed students in groups of 3 to 12 people at three different institutions. The language learners were asked for their ideas about how they would like TOEFL preparation classes to be conducted, compared to what they had already experienced. In the preliminary findings reported by Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996), the students suggested “having a placement test before a TOEFL preparation course, more opportunities for student participation and student questioning; diagnosis of individual student weaknesses, and the combination of self-study with revision in class” (p. 285).

Alderson and Hamp-Lyons acknowledged, however, that their study would not be able to answer questions about the actual “effects of TOEFL on learners and learning” (p. 284). In fact, only one of the language testing washback studies has

documented any demonstrable gains in student learning that can be tied to the use of a test. Hughes (1988) was able to show that students' performance on the Michigan Test (a different, widely recognized measure of English proficiency) increased following the introduction of a new exam and subsequent changes in the English program at a Turkish university.

On the other hand, empirical studies of IELTS washback on learners and the learning process are scarce. The preliminary efforts made by some researchers in this area (e.g. Archibald, 2001; Brown, 1998; Deakin, 1996; & Geranpayeh, 1994) have confirmed some of Alderson and Wall's (1993) Washback Hypotheses on learning (for example, a test influences students' learning content and strategies and the influence varies from student to student) and some of Bailey's (1996) assumptions on the learning processes students would take up. However, these empirical studies have some weaknesses in methodology. Therefore, a picture of IELTS washback on learners and the learning process is still incomplete and vague.

This study addresses that void by researching washback to the learner in the testing environment of IELTS AWM preparation course within a large IELTS program at a language institute. The research questions provided the framework necessary to uncover the learner perspectives that relate to washback through a mix of both qualitative and quantitative methods. These questions were as follows:

1. Is there any washback effect of IELTS writing tests on learners' motivation both in IELTS and non-IELTS courses?
2. Is there any washback effect of IELTS writing tests on learners' anxiety for the test?
3. Is there any washback effect of IELTS writing tests on learners' test taking strategies?
4. Do learners bring different expectations to IELTS writing preparation courses?
5. Do the learners' expectations of IELTS writing courses differ from the expectations of non-IELTS learners?

## Method

### Participants and Research Settings

The participants in this study were selected from IELTS Academic Writing preparation and Advanced Writing classes held at a language institute in Tehran. To control for differences attributable to nationality and first language, all participants in this study were Iranians and L1 speakers of Persian. The participants of the main study (n=79) were both male and female (mostly aged 19-35). IELTS preparation participants were the youngest with an average age of 22 years, while advanced course participants averaged 25. Overall, 41 of participants were female, 33 male, and 5 participants didn't respond to the question. There were 42 learners in non-IELTS courses (i.e. Advanced Writing classes) and 37 studying in IELTS preparation courses. IELTS preparation classes included fewer students on average with a lower proportion of learners; hence, the non-IELTS group was substantially larger than the IELTS preparation group. Most IELTS participants were studying with the aim of entry to local or international universities at Bachelor or Master levels.

The IELTS preparation courses included in this study ranged from 8 to 10 weeks in length and the non-IELTS courses ranged from 5 to 10 weeks. Although the courses varied in length, we didn't expect this variable to predict differences in responses to the questionnaire items and so is not included in the analyses that follow. The non-IELTS courses were all Advanced and Post-advanced writing courses. Students on these courses were assessed through a combination of teacher assessments and locally developed tests. These features of the context should be kept in mind in interpreting the results.

### **Instrumentation**

The instruments used in the study consisted of:

Qualitative Methods:

- Classroom observations
- Semi-structured interviews

Quantitative Methods:

- A TOEFL test (for determining the homogeneity of participants)
- Two linked forms of the IELTS Academic Writing Module (AWM). All IELTS tasks were scored by two independent raters (including the researcher) using the official IELTS Writing Assessment Guide (IELTS, 2000). The scoring scale was initially "pilot-tested" (Weigle, 2002, p. 89) with the test scripts of 58 EFL students at KEI (Kish English Institute) and Tehran Institute of Technology. There were satisfactory inter-rater and intra-rater agreement and reliability (inter-rater)  $r = .80$  and (intra-rater)  $r = .93$  (using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient).

- Four student questionnaires: (a) The learners' motivation toward the IELTS writing tests: *Student Questionnaire A*, (b) The learners' anxiety toward the IELTS writing tests: *Student Questionnaire B*, (c) The learners' use of test-taking strategies in the IELTS writing tests: *Student Questionnaire C*, and (d) The expectations students bring to their courses: *Student Questionnaire D*). Items comprised a sentence accompanied by a five-point Likert scale attached to descriptors ranging from *I definitely disagree* to *I definitely agree*. Internal consistency reliability of the questionnaires' items was measured by the Cronbach Alpha coefficient. The reliability of the items in Questionnaire A was estimated  $\alpha = .57$ . However, the reliability estimates of the other questionnaires, B, C, and D, enjoyed higher degrees of internal consistency or reliability (Questionnaire B,  $\alpha = .88$ ; Questionnaire C,  $\alpha = .74$ ; and Questionnaire D,  $\alpha = .83$ ).

### **Data Collection Procedures**

In order to carry out this study, the following steps were taken.

**Stage I.** First, the homogeneity of the participants across the groups was determined in terms of their L2 proficiency by administering an official version of the TOEFL to 140 participants. The homogeneity of the participants was proved based on the scores of the testees in their TOEFL. Based on their scores, those participants who obtained scores within the range of one standard deviation above and below the mean participated in this study. Out of 90 subjects who had obtained scores within that range, 79 subjects were selected and were randomly assigned to

Experimental and Control Groups. They comprised 42 learners in non-IELTS courses (i.e. Advanced Writing classes) and 37 studying in IELTS preparation courses.

**Stage II.** The first interview was conducted prior to the IELTS preparation course. This interview focused on the learners' plan for the course and their perceptions of the differences between IELTS and non-IELTS courses that they had previously attended.

**Stage III.** In this stage, learners took an Academic Writing Module of IELTS as their pretest. Furthermore, the learners were asked to complete 4 questionnaires to collect information about their motivation for the study, test anxiety, test-taking strategies, and expectations of the IELTS preparation course. They were also given these questionnaires at the end of the course to record any changes in their perspectives or knowledge of the test.

**Stage IV.** In this stage, treatment was conducted. The treatment conditions of the study were operationalized for the IELTS Academic Writing preparation class.

**IELTS Academic Writing Preparation:** A syllabus was designed for use in IELTS AWM course as their treatment sessions. IELTS test practice materials had focused on the requirements of the IELTS Academic Writing tests and had been targeted at problem areas with hints for improvement. Moreover, in each session after presenting the IELTS test practice materials (while focusing on IELTS Academic Writing Test Tasks and Strategies), the Experimental Group (i.e. IELTS learners) was assigned to take an IELTS sample test. Six IELTS sample tests were taken during this preparation course. These sample tests were used to help students practice under test conditions and develop their understanding of IELTS Academic Writing Test.

**Participant Observation:** The primary data collection instrument employed in this study was participant observation. One of the researchers as the participant observer used the process of informal observations over the course of a two-month period of time. The informal observation design allowed the researcher to be unobtrusive in the IELTS preparation setting, maintaining the routine nature of the teaching, testing, and learning relationships.

**Non-Participant Observation:** Upon selection of learners for the study, specific class sessions were chosen for observation. The classes were selected based on the lesson scheduled for that day, and its relationship to the material included on the impending test. This offered a focused opportunity to investigate potential washback behaviors.

The researcher recorded information such as the teacher behaviors exhibited during the class, the student behaviors exhibited as a result of instruction, the content/materials, any audio-visual sources utilized in the lesson, the time allotted to different activities, and any behaviors or occurrences that the researcher felt might be worthy of potential analysis because they appeared to be behaviors indicating washback.

**Interview:** Along with the observations of "test impacting" lessons and "the student behaviors," learners participated in their second interview during the IELTS AWM preparation course. The second student interview occurred after a bit of orientation to IELTS Academic Writing Test. This interview focused on how the learners perceived that IELTS writing preparation course changed their perspectives

toward the test as well as their knowledge of the test, if at all, since the beginning of the IELTS preparation class.

**Stage V.** In this stage, after treatment was conducted, both the first and the second test forms of the IELTS AWM were administered as their post-test to statistically equate the test forms for their level of difficulty. All IELTS tasks were scored by two independent raters (including the researcher) using the official IELTS Writing Assessment Guide (IELTS, 2000). The raters employed for the study were all IELTS instructors and experts in rating IELTS scripts and writing instruction. To preclude any bias resulting from expectations of gain following instruction, the rater was given no indication of whether any given script had been written at course entry or at the course exit. There were satisfactory inter-rater and intra-rater agreement and reliability (inter-rater)  $r = .80$  and (intra-rater)  $r = .93$  respectively (using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient).

Furthermore, the students were given the questionnaires at the end of the course to record any changes in their perspectives or knowledge of the test.

A final interview was held after students had finished their IELTS preparation course. This final interview elicited responses about changes that had occurred in the learner's perspectives as a result of their increased knowledge of the test and the testing procedures for IELTS AWM. The interview transcriptions were coded and analyzed by the researcher according to learner perspectives that influenced behavior patterns observed in the classroom, those that reflected washback behaviors from the testing program; and those that were discussed in interviews but were not observed frequently.

Table 1 delineates the areas that were measured based on the study's research questions along with an overview of the data collection instruments, procedures, and sources associated with each area.

Table 1

*Overview of Data Collection Instruments, Procedures, and Sources*

| Area to be Measured  | Collection Instrument       | Collection Procedures and Source   |
|--|-----------------------------|--|
| Learners' Motivation for Taking an IELTS AWM Preparation Course (A)<br>Test-Taking Anxiety (B)<br>The Use of Test-Taking Strategies (C)<br>Learners' Expectations from this Course (D) | Participant Observation     | Informal Classroom Observations<br>Formal Classroom Observations<br>Formal Student Interviews<br>Student Questionnaires A, B, C, and D |
|  | Non-Participant Observation |  |
|  | Interview                   |  |
|  | Questionnaire               |  |

|  |                                |  |
|--|--------------------------------|--|
|  | Test Forms of the<br>IELTS AWM |  |
|--|--------------------------------|--|

### Data Analysis

The data gathered through the aforementioned procedures were analyzed from both quantitative and qualitative perspectives to answer the research questions.

Qualitative data from student interviews and classroom observations were coded, evaluated, and analyzed using Spreadsheet software package in order to identify changes in learner behaviors observed by the researcher or self reported by learners as a result of increased knowledge of the test.

The quantitative component of the study, for which SPSS 15 software package and STATISTICA (8.0) for statistical analysis in social sciences were used, included a summary of the basic descriptive statistics of the TOEFL scores, learners' perspectives, and the writing pretest and posttest scores of the groups, and running a GLM Repeated Measures ANOVA to test the main effects, within and between the subjects, interaction effects between factors, covariate effects, and effects of interactions between covariates and between subject factors. Moreover, a MANCOVA was run to detect the mean differences in terms of treatment effect and to track the trend evidenced for this group in the GLM Repeated-Measures ANOVA results. The learner information was gathered to investigate learner perspectives and further describe washback in the IELTS AWM preparation classrooms.

## Results and Discussion

### Descriptive Statistics of the Groups' Pretest and Posttest Writing Scores

The washback literature reviewed reveals that instruction directed toward test demands will result in higher, but less interpretable, scores. Was this the case for preparation courses directed toward the IELTS Academic Writing Test? In this section, the changes made by learners participating in the study in writing test performance are described. Table 2 shows the basic descriptive statistics of the two groups' pretest and posttest scores on the IELTS Academic Writing Test employed in this study. As noted earlier, the possible maximum band score of this test was 9, and an eight-week interval occurred between the pretest and posttest sessions. This table reveals the mean scores and standard deviation of the experimental and control groups.

Table 2

*The Summary of Descriptive Statistics of the Groups' Writing Pretest and Posttest Scores*

| Variable            | Control Group |           | Experimental Group |           |
|---------------------|---------------|-----------|--------------------|-----------|
|                     | Mean          | Std. Dev. | Mean               | Std. Dev. |
| <b>Writing-Pre</b>  | 4.57          | 1.24      | 4.36               | 1.06      |
| <b>Writing-Post</b> | 5.13          | 1.07      | 5.44               | 1.02      |
| <b>Writing-Gain</b> | 0.56          | 0.86      | 1.08               | 0.69      |



It seems that a big gain in writing scores indeed occurred in both experimental and control groups. The mean score of learners in experimental group at the pretest was 4.36 that changed to 5.44 at the posttest. However, the mean score of learners in control group at the pretest was 4.57 that changed to 5.13 at the posttest. Taken as a whole, the learners improved their writing scores by 1.08 of a band score in experimental group and 0.56 in control group. Figure 1 shows the groups' pretest and posttest writing scores.

Although learners in both groups increased their scores from pretest to posttest, the learners in the experimental group were found to make greater improvements in their Writing scores. However, in order to determine whether the learners in experimental group outperformed the learners of control group or whether the treatment has had an influential part in the learners' improvement of their writing scores, Analysis of Covariance was undertaken. The analysis revealed significant effects ( $F = 8.12, p = 0.01$ ) for IELTS Writing Preparation course and the learners' improvements in their Writing scores (see Table 3).

Table 3

*Univariate Results for the Groups' Writing Pretest and Posttest Scores*

| Effect      | Univariate Results |                 |                 |                |                  |
|-------------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------|------------------|
|             | Degr. of Freedom   | Writing-Post SS | Writing-Post MS | Writing-Post F | Writing-Post $p$ |
| Intercept   | 1                  | 24.08           | 24.08           | 49.61          | 0.00             |
| Writing-Pre | 1                  | 47.94           | 47.94           | 98.76          | 0.00             |
| Group       | 1                  | 3.94            | 3.94            | 8.12           | 0.01             |
| Error       | 76                 | 36.89           | 0.49            |                |                  |
| Total       | 78                 | 86.70           |                 |                |                  |

The results of the analysis of covariance set out in Table 3 show that, when Writing Pretest scores were taken into account, there was a significant effect for the Groups' Writing Posttest scores. Therefore, there is support here for the belief that courses directed toward the IELTS test are more effective than the non-IELTS (i.e., Academic Writing courses) in boosting IELTS Writing scores.

### **Descriptive Statistics of the Learners' Perspectives**

After describing the Groups' pretest and posttest scores, the next step was to describe the learners' perspectives at the pretest and posttest stages and their gain scores on the IELTS Academic Writing and Academic Writing courses from pretest to posttest. Table 4 shows the basic descriptive statistics of the learners' perspectives pretest, posttest, and their gain scores.

Table 4

*The Summary of Descriptive Statistics of the Learners' Perspectives scores*

| Learners' Perspectives | Variable | Control Group |           | Experimental Group |      |
|------------------------|----------|---------------|-----------|--------------------|------|
|                        |          | Mean          | Std. Dev. | Mean               | Std. |

|                               |                           |       |      |       | <b>Dev.</b> |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|-------|------|-------|-------------|
| <b>Learners' Motivation</b>   | <b>Motivation-Pre</b>     | 3.21  | 0.61 | 3.46  | 0.59        |
|                               | <b>Motivation -Post</b>   | 3.16  | 0.62 | 3.43  | 0.62        |
|                               | <b>Motivation -Gain</b>   | -0.05 | 0.53 | -0.03 | 0.63        |
| <b>Test-Taking Anxiety</b>    | <b>Anxiety -Pre</b>       | 2.48  | 0.60 | 2.56  | 0.59        |
|                               | <b>Anxiety -Post</b>      | 2.46  | 0.70 | 2.56  | 0.59        |
|                               | <b>Anxiety -Gain</b>      | -0.03 | 0.61 | 0.00  | 0.55        |
| <b>Test-Taking Strategies</b> | <b>Test Strat.-Pre</b>    | 3.36  | 0.47 | 3.57  | 0.42        |
|                               | <b>Test Strat.-Post</b>   | 3.34  | 0.50 | 3.51  | 0.50        |
|                               | <b>Test Strat.-Gain</b>   | -0.02 | 0.56 | -0.06 | 0.55        |
| <b>Learners' Expectations</b> | <b>Expectations -Pre</b>  | 4.34  | 0.51 | 4.39  | 0.53        |
|                               | <b>Expectations -Post</b> | 4.21  | 0.63 | 4.14  | 0.66        |
|                               | <b>Expectations -Gain</b> | -0.13 | 0.60 | -0.26 | 0.66        |

This table shows the mean scores and standard deviations of the experimental and control groups. The raw scores indicate that the mean scores for learners' perspectives (including learners' motivation, test-taking anxiety, test-taking strategies, and learners' expectations) at the pretests and the posttests did not change considerably. That is, the learners' perspectives in both groups did not increase their scores from pretest to posttest. The learners' perspectives pretest and posttest scores are displayed in Figure 2.

To further explore the learners' perspectives change and mean performance of the groups from pretest to posttest, parametric analyses should be performed.

### **The Results of the Multivariate Tests for Repeated Measures ANOVA for Learners' Perspectives**

A Multivariate Test for Repeated Measures was run to compare group means (i.e. the learners' perspectives of both Experimental and Control Groups) of this study at two various points in time (i.e. pretest vs. posttest) with an interval of eight weeks in between. The results of the Multivariate Test for Repeated Measures for the within-subjects effects displayed in Table 5 don't indicate a statistically significant difference for the within-subjects variable of learners' perspectives, meaning that the learners' perspectives' mean and change from one time (pretest) to another (posttest) was not noticeably significant ( $F=1.319, p>.05$ ). More importantly, a statistically significant effect was not found for the interaction of learners' perspectives and writing gain ( $F=0.104, p>.05$ ), showing that the statistically significant development, change, or achievement in learners' perspectives did not occur with respect to the levels of their writing gain scores. Furthermore, a statistically significant effect was not found for the interaction of the learners' perspectives and the groups ( $F=0.357, p>.05$ ), meaning that no significant difference of change or improvement in the learners' perspectives occurred between the groups. That is, the statistically significant development, change or achievement in learners' perspectives did not occur in any of the groups influenced by IELTS Academic Writing preparation course employed in their treatment settings or academic writing course.

Table 5  
*The Results of Multivariate Test for Repeated Measures*

| Effect          | Multivariate Tests for Repeated Measures |       |       |           |          |          |
|-----------------|--|-------|-------|-----------|----------|----------|
|                 | Test                                     | Value | F     | Effect df | Error df | <i>p</i> |
| R1              | Wilks                                    | 0.949 | 1.319 | 3         | 74       | 0.274    |
|                 | Pillai's                                 | 0.050 | 1.319 | 3         | 74       | 0.274    |
|                 | Hotelling                                | 0.053 | 1.319 | 3         | 74       | 0.274    |
| R1*Writing-Gain | Wilks                                    | 0.995 | 0.104 | 3         | 74       | 0.957    |
|                 | Pillai's                                 | 0.004 | 0.104 | 3         | 74       | 0.957    |
|                 | Hotelling                                | 0.004 | 0.104 | 3         | 74       | 0.957    |
| R1*Group        | Wilks                                    | 0.985 | 0.357 | 3         | 74       | 0.784    |
|                 | Pillai's                                 | 0.014 | 0.357 | 3         | 74       | 0.784    |
|                 | Hotelling                                | 0.014 | 0.357 | 3         | 74       | 0.784    |

Although a statistically significant effect was not found for interactions, Univariate Tests of Significance for gain were run to see whether this analysis might reveal a significant effect or not. The Univariate Tests of Significance for gain showed no significant ( $p > .05$ ) effects for either Motivation-Gain or Anxiety-Gain. Similarly, Univariate Tests of Significance for gains with Test-taking strategies or Expectations indicated no significant ( $p > .05$ ) effects. However, the results of the Univariate Tests of Significance for writing gain shown by Table 6 indicate the occurrence of a statistically significant difference between the mean performances that is the writing gain ( $F = 8.255$ ,  $p < .05$ ) of the experimental and control groups in this study. Table 6 displays the results of the Univariate Tests of Significance for writing gain.

Table 6  
*The Results of Univariate Tests of Significance for Gain*

| Effect            | Univariate Tests of Significance for Gain |                  |       |       |          |
|-------------------|---|------------------|-------|-------|----------|
|                   | SS  | Degr. of Freedom | MS    | F     | <i>p</i> |
| Motivation-Gain   | 0.050                                     | 1                | 0.050 | 0.077 | 0.780    |
| Anxiety-Gain      | 0.040                                     | 1                | 0.040 | 0.062 | 0.802    |
| Test Stra-Gain    | 0.017                                     | 1                | 0.017 | 0.026 | 0.870    |
| Expectations-Gain | 0.149                                     | 1                | 0.149 | 0.232 | 0.631    |
| Group             | 5.314                                     | 1                | 5.314 | 8.255 | 0.005    |

That IELTS Academic writing preparation course influences on the group's writing performance seems clear, but how this course influences learners' perspectives is much less clear. Box plot in Figure 3 displays clearly the treatment effects computed for covariates at their means.

As noted, the results of the Table 6 and Figure 3 demonstrate that the treatment presented in this study did not have a significant effect on the learners' perspectives of the IELTS Academic writing preparation course. Based on these results, it can be concluded that the null hypotheses of this study are not all rejected.

Since the aforementioned results indicated no statistically significant effect of IELTS Academic writing preparation course on the learners' perspectives, at the last stage Writing OPost (i.e. only posttest) was administered as a posttest which had no pretest to statistically equate the test forms for their level of difficulty and to measure and analyze the learners' perspectives according to the Writing OPost results. Table 7 delineates the basic descriptive statistics of the two groups' Writing Opost scores on the IELTS Academic Writing test employed in this study.

Table 7

*The Summary of Descriptive Statistics of the Groups' Writing OPosttest Scores*

| Variable      | Control Group |           | Experimental Group |           |
|---------------|---------------|-----------|--------------------|-----------|
|               | Mean          | Std. Dev. | Mean               | Std. Dev. |
| Writing-OPost | 5.22          | 1.11      | 5.47               | 0.87      |

This table reveals that the mean score of learners in experimental group in this posttest was 5.47 and the control group's mean was 5.22. This indicates that the learners of experimental group outperformed those in control group.

Moreover, a Multivariate Test for Repeated Measures was used (see Table 8) to test the main effects within and between the subjects, interaction effects, covariate effects, and effects of interactions between covariates and between subject factors.

Table 8

*The Results of Multivariate Test for Repeated Measures*

| Effect                  | Multivariate Tests for Repeated Measures |       |      |           |          |          |
|-------------------------|--|-------|------|-----------|----------|----------|
|                         | Test                                     | Value | F    | Effect df | Error df | <i>p</i> |
| <b>R1</b>               | Wilks                                    | 0.93  | 1.72 | 3         | 74       | 0.17     |
|                         | Pillai's                                 | 0.07  | 1.72 | 3         | 74       | 0.17     |
|                         | Hotelling                                | 0.07  | 1.72 | 3         | 74       | 0.17     |
|                         | Roy's                                    | 0.07  | 1.72 | 3         | 74       | 0.17     |
| <b>R1*Writing-OPost</b> | Wilks                                    | 0.95  | 1.30 | 3         | 74       | 0.28     |
|                         | Pillai's                                 | 0.05  | 1.30 | 3         | 74       | 0.28     |
|                         | Hotelling                                | 0.05  | 1.30 | 3         | 74       | 0.28     |
|                         | Roy's                                    | 0.05  | 1.30 | 3         | 74       | 0.28     |
| <b>R1*Group</b>         | Wilks                                    | 0.98  | 0.38 | 3         | 74       | 0.77     |
|                         | Pillai's                                 | 0.02  | 0.38 | 3         | 74       | 0.77     |
|                         | Hotelling                                | 0.02  | 0.38 | 3         | 74       | 0.77     |
|                         | Roy's                                    | 0.02  | 0.38 | 3         | 74       | 0.77     |

The results of this Multivariate Test for Repeated Measures displayed in Table 8 do not indicate a statistically significant difference ( $F = 1.72, p > 0.05$ ) for the within-subjects variable of learners' perspectives. In addition, a statistically significant difference was found neither for the interaction of Learners' perspectives and Writing-OPost ( $F = 1.30, p > 0.05$ ) nor for the interaction of learners' perspectives and the groups ( $F = 0.38, p > 0.05$ ) employed in this study. The results of Table 5 were approved in this analysis as well. Therefore, finding no significant effect was not as a result of the writing tests used, the level of difficulty of the test, or the writing topics. The research findings revealed that the IELTS Academic Writing course influenced learners' writing gain scores; however, learners' perspectives toward the exam remained largely unchanged. Therefore, qualitative methods were also employed based on the goals and the circumstances of the study to illuminate the issues, suggest answers to questions, describe the process, or explain what change looks like from the perspective of the students.

### Qualitative Analysis

#### Findings of Classroom Observations Related to Research Questions

A total of 24 classroom observations were conducted during the course of the research project: 12 participant and 12 non-participant observations involving four teachers. During classroom observations, the researcher made field notes on the interaction in the classroom as lessons progressed, and recorded everything that happened during each classroom session, mainly learners' perspectives and attitude throughout the entire class session. Class observations were recorded using a model (i.e., the observation scheme) adapted from the Saphier and Gower's model (1997), where the recording sheet was divided into two halves: One side for teacher talk, and one side for student talk. To facilitate the field-noting process, the researcher sometimes used a Digital Voice Recorder to document observations and discussions over the course of each class visit. Besides being a participant researcher, the researcher also made 12 visits to the four participating classes ranging in duration from one hour to 4 hours in length. During these visits, nearly 125 field notes were recorded.

To enhance the reliability of the data collection and analysis, the researcher employed two approaches: (a) cross checking with existing data, and (b) inviting inter-coders. The purpose of cross checking was to make sure that the researcher was consistent with the criteria for analysis. The purpose of inter-coding was to ensure consistency in the units of analysis. Greater than 90% agreement (using frequency count) was achieved with the independent but experienced observers. Validity issues were also addressed in the research design of the study by establishing multiple sources of data and multiple methods of gathering the same data.

To analyze the classroom observation data, each observation was organized into the percentage of time spent on a specific activity and learner behaviors using Microsoft Excel. The observations of this study provided information not only about the washback effects on student learning but also about the behavior patterns learners demonstrated in their classes. The patterns signaled a variety of factors influencing learner perspectives and included how tests influenced learning,

learners, and the class activities in IELTS Academic Writing or Academic Writing (i.e., non-IELTS) courses. However, IELTS classes were dominated by the test. Classes were directed explicitly toward ensuring success on the test. There were frequent mentions of IELTS (58 times during the IELTS classes, compared with just 4 times during Academic Writing classes) and of strategies for dealing with the test tasks. Most of the materials used were either taken from IELTS text books or chosen by the teacher to reflect the content of the test. Frequent essay writing practice involved test practice under timed conditions and completing tasks closely modeled on IELTS. Feedback was often provided in the form of IELTS band scores. In addition, teachers attended to sentence structure and the use of a variety of appropriate vocabulary in their evaluation of students' writing and in their own teaching. In contrast, Academic Writing classes generally involved little attention and mention of tests and offered a wider range of teaching points. There were greater variety in the length and the type of essays taught and practiced. Hence, washback was more evident through the shift toward using and doing more test-like activities and tasks in IELTS preparation courses.

However, there were clearly observable differences in the perspectives exhibited by the learners. Many of the same types of behavior were evident in both IELTS Academic Writing and Academic Writing courses, which is not surprising given that the commonalities in the courses made students of both courses exhibit such behavior. In contrast, there were discrepancies among learners' perspectives, views, and attitudes.

Classroom observations revealed that learners' perspectives toward the exams were not similar, indicating that their views and practices differed. The researchers found some learners motivated (35% of those observed), some others indifferent (32% of those observed), and the others not motivated at all. With regard to test-taking anxiety, students of all achievement levels experienced test anxiety, though some suffered more from worry and preoccupation (37% of those observed) about not being able to do well on tests. There were differences in test-taking strategy use among the learners. However, observations showed that learners of IELTS Academic Preparation course used more test-taking strategies than the learners of non-IELTS or Academic writing course as they spent more time writing a large range of tasks while employing different test-taking strategies (10% at IELTS class, 2% at Academic Writing class), reflecting the emphasis on test-taking strategies. Under further analysis, when the teacher provided information about IELTS or gave the students exam strategies, the relevant activities were calculated as a percentage of the total class time. Observations from the learners regarding their course expectations revealed that learners registered for their courses with expectations of learning (83% of those observed), which varied according to their course aims. They also reflected divergent experiences of what they had learned in advance. However, it did not appear that the differences in course content were driven by differences in learner expectations.

Overall, it was difficult to decipher the changes of learners' perspectives that were the result of exam preparation courses, and to estimate which was the result of past testing experiences. Furthermore, this study considered various affective and cognitive factors of learners' perspectives, such as learners' motivation, anxiety, test-

taking strategies, and learners' expectations, with conflicting results. This could be one of the reasons that investigating washback on learners is so complex.

### **Data Analysis and Results for Learner Interviews**

A total of 15 interview sessions were run with 9 learners of IELTS Academic Writing course and 6 learners of non-IELTS or Academic Writing course at three stages: prior to the course, during the course, and at the end of the course. All interviews were recorded on a Digital Voice Recorder, which were transcribed, summarized, and compared with responses at the beginning and during the course of instruction.

Several common themes emerged from the learner interviews. The details revealed by learners supported what the researchers observed. In the first interview, many learners made references to the other courses such as FCE (First Certificate of English) courses that they had passed prior to participating in preparation courses that they were going to attend and stated that they believed these exam preparation courses would be different from previous courses in terms of the activities, tasks, and test practices used in those courses. The second interview comments reflected an acknowledged change in focus resulting from increased familiarity with the course and the preparation course. The interview indicated that many learners felt more comfortable with the course materials as a result of their familiarity with the course curriculum and the testing program. At the end of the course, each learner admitted the impact of IELTS Academic Writing preparation course on their writing performance. They also remarked how their preparedness influenced their writing performance. Additional comments from learners during the last interview revealed even more about the overall IELTS Academic Writing and Academic Writing experiences they enjoyed and the changes that they made to their learning plans. When asked in the last interview session how your learning plan for the course changed as a result of taking the tests, one of the participants said,

*I started this class believing that... I can never get the required band score. Thus I didn't start this class expecting to get high scores in my writings. But as time passed I really noticed that my writing was really improving as I was taking more and more practice tests. This point encouraged me to study harder, because I knew that there was much stuff out there to learn and apply. I didn't throw out what I learned in my previous English courses but... I added and tried to modify it in a way that I could succeed in the test.*

The major conclusion reached through examination of the interview data appeared to be that change had occurred for some learners, but not for all, and to different degrees. It also appeared that this change might differ with the passage of time. In addition, learners had mixed feelings toward the preparation course and the exam, recognizing on the one hand that this course made them work hard to achieve good scores but at the same time they thought that this course could not satisfy all their needs and that exams were not an accurate reflection of all aspects of their study. More specifically, learners' perspectives to test preparation varied. Some students tended to rely on fulfilling writing tasks rather than motivating themselves to learn. One of them said,

*What helps me in carrying out these tasks is that I learned how to do it. However, it is harder for me because it seems that I want to include everything presented in tables and figures but that seems impossible.*

For another learner in non-IELTS Academic writing course, constructing a different attitude toward writing rested in part on her reflectively juxtaposing aspects of writing with other subjects she had experienced, such as logic and mathematics. She stated,

*Writing is, to some extent, more logical than thinking...I'm getting to like academic writing now. Just a bit... Since I don't dislike logic. I am taking math as well now, which has been doing logically, too. And I realize that the problem that I have is I'm not good at brainstorming.*

Various factors were cited by learners becoming motivated and interested in these courses. For instance, one learner said,

*I know that getting involved in different tasks and motivation are important factors in learning, perhaps... the most important factors; however, I enjoy doing different writing tasks. It is because in the course of IELTS writing practices, I can learn to write in a variety of styles and organize my ideas carefully. This course helped to build my knowledge of the test with spending much time on test practices.*

In contrast, some students seemed to have problems with different approaches to writing, as one said,

*I feel not so exciting. Some writing tasks have really become a grinding thing without pleasure. Why do we have to restrict our ideas in topic sentences? It just makes me lose ideas on how to argue in an interesting way. I am used to this way to write directly from heart, from... intuition not skills, which makes me feel glee and sparks more ideas.*

Through interviews with IELTS and Non-IELTS learners about their preparation practices, the researchers found that the findings were contradictory. Some learners claimed that the preparation course had affected them positively, e.g. they had experienced an increase in motivation, while others reported that they had been affected negatively, e.g. they had experienced fear, pressure, and anxiety, felt that the test did not reflect real learning, all indicating that their perspectives, views, and practices differed. A picture emerged from the learner interviews of a package of test-taking strategies aimed at improving textual organization through planning and paragraphing skills. The learners of the IELTS Academic writing course claimed that there was a focus on data comparison for task one and argument structure for task two with practice in managing the production of two essays with the word limits given within one hour. On the other hand, some students commented on the issue that they had been disadvantaged by topics that they knew too little about and understanding how to analyze graphs or charts.

*The most difficult and frustrating point is when you are given a topic to write an essay about and you do not have a clear image of what you need to write and include; however, we were taught some test-taking strategies, such as "It is very hard to delineate the meaning of ....., but as I figure it out it...."*

*For analyzing tables, charts, and figures you need to practice and think fast. Sometimes, you get baffled and it is so hard to keep everything in mind and focus on the most remarkable points.*

The participants in the non-IELTS or Academic Writing course talked about the different approaches of writing an essay while focusing on its topic, vocabulary, sentence structure, the use of sources and references, and collecting model essays and memorizing them. There was a shared belief among participants that the course provided learners with the opportunity for improving test scores. However, there were discrepancies in the amount of gain that could be expected. Learners in the



IELTS Academic Writing course required and expected a certain level of ability to benefit from preparation course. On the other hand, some participants contended that progress beyond a certain band score would be unlikely and some others believed that luck played an important role in their success. The interview indicated that some of the student expectations with regard to the test were met and influenced the class tasks and activities and the instructional behaviors of the teachers. Despite the differences in learners' expectations, some of their expectations were not taken into account. More importantly, every learner, to varying degrees, reported focusing on different tasks and activities that were included on the tests with varying behavioral patterns and perspectives, indicating a complex relationship between exams and learners' perspectives.

In sum, the findings of the qualitative analysis provided further evidence for learners' perspectives which were disparate and too mixed, probing the complex and manifold mechanisms of the learner washback studies. While the study reiterated the complexity of investigating washback to the learner, it also provided an indication as to the sources of this complexity that can be traced both inside and outside the classroom context.

### Conclusion

Data analysis revealed that tests affected learning, and learners could profit, in terms of writing score gains, from giving attention to IELTS preparation tasks and activities, but the additional benefit was surprisingly limited. However, there was little evidence of dramatic increases in scores on the part of the learners as a result of preparation in their Academic Writing courses. In contrast, the data showed that the washback effect of this exam seems to be limited in the sense that it did not appear to have a fundamental effect on learners' perspectives. In other words, learners' motivation for the study, test anxiety, test-taking strategies, and their expectations remained largely unchanged. The behaviors suggesting washback exhibited during this study were disparate and mixed. The central findings from the study are as follows:

- Tests affected learning in IELTS Academic Writing Preparation classes, but they affected different learners in different ways. That is, the effect was not the same in degree or in kind from learner to learner.
- No significant change was observed regarding aspects of examination influence on the learners' perspectives.
- The contribution of test preparation to learners' perspectives appeared to be minimal in this setting. Learners pursuing a test-preparation course did not obtain a significant advantage in their perspectives. However, learners intending to take the test, both the learners of IELTS Academic Writing course and the Academic Writing course, did take a significant advantage in their test performance.
- Washback was evident in a number of learner behaviors observed in the classroom during this study, but the degree to which they were observed varied from learner to learner. However, these behaviors were not identified as a result of student questionnaire analyses.

- Learner washback behavior observed in the classroom mostly included engaging in test related activities such as writing argumentative essays, or presenting the information in tables or diagrams.
- It is important to reiterate that the extent to which learner perspectives reflect only test expectations was limited due to the variety of other factors influencing learner perspectives that included but were not limited to, learner motivation for study, test anxiety, test-taking strategies, and their expectations of the IELTS preparation course.
- Learner interviews and classroom observations revealed that learners wanted to know as much as possible about the test, and they believed it was the teacher's job to communicate that information to them.
- Learners had mixed feelings toward the exam, recognizing on the one hand that the exam made them work hard to achieve good band scores and considering on the other hand that exams were not an accurate reflection of all aspects of their study.
- There may be individual differences among learners in the way they perceive and react to exams.
- Learner perspectives and classroom practices can be in conflict with regard to testing and washback.
- In this context, it seems to be washback to the program, rather than washback to the learner, which has the greater relevance to outcomes.
- This study indicated that rather than being a direct automatic effect, washback is actually complex and elusive; while this study showed that there was washback from the exam onto a variety of learning areas, it also indicated that washback to the learner was not present and it varied in form and intensity.
- Learner interviews and classroom observations also revealed that other than the exam, there are many independent and intervening variables such as teacher factors, the stakes of the test, the design of the test, textbooks, resources, classroom conditions, management of classroom practices, and many other factors which seem to be important variables influencing learners and their learning.
- Above all, this study demonstrated the importance of complementary qualitative and quantitative data collection, as well as an acceptance that not all would go as planned. Flaws in the study and unexpected results led the researcher to analyze and re-analyze the data in an attempt to understand them.

In sum, several discrepant findings from this study further support the argument that washback is quite context-oriented and complex. Simply examining one or some factors or examining the phenomenon in one context is not capable of explaining critical washback issues, such as how and why washback phenomenon influences some learners but not others. Previous washback studies conducted by Cheng (1998), Ferman (2004), Green (2007), Read and Hayes (2003), and Shohamy et al. (1996), have shown that affecting learner perspectives is challenging and complex and requires an attentive focus on various affective, cognitive, and social factors. Focusing on these variables can help provide learners with the critical perspective needed for improvement, as well as the impetus for change in behaviors when needed. In addition, learner perspectives concerning the relationship between

teaching, learning, and high-stakes exams needs to be studied longitudinally and directly using research methods that will capture the aspects under investigation more clearly. However, it can also be argued that even more methods could be employed to help researchers probe deeper into the less observable factors related to the individuals involved. Without this type of focus or attention, learners will often continue to learn in the same manner that they are used to learn, and will continue to emphasize what they believe are the important aspects of language learning, whether or not they are based on skills, and/or included on the tests. Future research into washback, by taking learner perspectives into account, will provide more grounded accounts of test washback and its implications for test validity.

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