

EXAMINING WASHBACK OF NATIONAL EXAMINATION: EFL TEACHERS AND STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS

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Abstract - This study aims at examining washback of 2017 English school national exam in Semarang, Indonesia, viewed from perceptions of EFL teachers and students. The participants of this study were 2 ninth-grade teachers and 16 ninth-graders of a junior high school in Semarang. Questionnaire and interview guide were used in gathering the data, and the research method used was descriptive qualitative method. The result of this study showed that the national examination provide both positive and negative effects for the participants. One of the positive washback indications for the EFL students was the big effort used by the students as the test takers in studying. However, the national examination also brought negative effect since the students paid more attention to the subjects tested in NE due to its use as the consideration of their next school level entrance, as it is said to be test-driven learning (Brown, 2004). Furthermore, for the teachers, it motivated them to have extra attempts to provide various teaching methods and teaching media in the teaching-learning process to help them get ready to take NE. In other word, it is test-driven teaching. In fact, the national exam only tested reading and writing skills, it made the teachers-not teach the English skills material equally. In conclusion, washback of the English secondary school national examination shows there is relationship between teaching and learning perspectives in preparing it.

Key Words: national examination, students and teachers perceptions, washback

I. INTRODUCTION

National Examination plays an important role in Indonesia. It has been one of the requirements to graduate from school since it is a standard evaluation system. It is also used as the graduation decision which is standardized by the government. Mardapi (2012) defines the national examination as the final test of a teaching program that is intended to analyze the national education standard attainment. Its usefulness as Indonesian education standard has already been implemented. The national examination was first administered in 1950. Then, in 2010, its score was the

only one to be used as the consideration for students to be able to graduate from school. There was changing then in 2011, NE score was not used as the only requirement for students to graduate. There were additional scores the students got from formative assessment that were considered important as their point of passing the standard criteria to graduate. In 2016, there was controversial issue that the NE administration will be deleted. The idea was then being considered that NE in Indonesia was necessary one with several reasons related to the norms in the society. One of the norms is related to students. There are several reasons why students put it as an important test. The students' result of NE will be used as the requirement that has become a policy from the government, to apply to the next study. Therefore, the important role of the national examination can be categorized as Indonesian high-stakes test. As mentioned by Madaus in Pizarro (2010), high stake test is a test which affects the test-takers and the other people feeling worried significantly. Johnson et al. in Polesel, Duffer, and Turnbull (2012) define high stakes tests in the United States as a test that affects the students' success, the teacher accountability, and the schools' reputation or the schools' funding. Therefore, it can be concluded that a high-stake test is a test which has significant consequences for the success of students. They can also be categorized into positive and negative consequences. Tayeb et al. (2014) stated that high-stakes test is a test that has serious results, both positive and negative, directly and significantly to the stakeholders. In short, NE as high stake test influences both EFL teachers and students in the instructional process. Washback, or also known as backwash, is "the effect of a test on teaching and learning process" (Hughes, 1989, p. 1). Green (2013) defines washback as the test preparation effects on the teaching and learning. It is in line with Brown (2004) definition of washback that it is the test effects on the instructions of the students' test preparation. Furthermore, Bachman and Palmer (1996) define

washback as the impact aspects that particularly attract both researchers of language testing and practitioners. Moreover, as an effect of tests, washback certainly has two sides, whether it is positive or negative, depending on whether it has an advantageous or harmful impact on educational practices. It is in line with the statement from Alderson and Wall (1993) that washback as a test that can be positively or negatively brings powerful determiner of things happen in the classroom. Messick (1996) interprets “*washback as a serious influence of a test to the language teachers and learners for doing things needed to promote or inhibit language learning*”.

Furthermore, it is mentioned by Pearson in Cheng, Watanabe, and Curtis (2004), the washback effect of a test will bring a negative effect if it is unable to reflect the learning principles and course objectives; and it will bring a positive effect if the effects are advantageous and as a result makes the expected changes. Alderson and Wall (1993), on the other hand, emphasized that the quality of the washback effect might be independent of the quality of a test. Any test, whether it is good or bad, can bring a beneficial or harmful effect to the school’s stakeholders.

In 2011, Sukyadi and Mardiani conducted a study about washback of NE in Indonesian context. At that time, the national examination was still used as students’ graduation determiner. Therefore, when test takers could not pass the exam, they were considered failed to graduate from their schools. This fact, as a result, brought much anxiety to them by thinking how to be able to graduate from school. The pressure that they got, in the end, made them did many things to be able to graduate from the school whether in a positive way or in a negative way.

Nowadays, NE is no longer used as the only graduation requirement. In 2016, the students’ graduation is determined by their characters evaluation and achievement score as their study results. Then, there is dilemma for its administration in school related to whether it will give impact to some aspects. Therefore, the study is intended to find and describe washback of the English national examination based on EFL students’ and teachers’ perceptions in one school in Semarang, Indonesia. This research is important to conduct as it gives an image of why NE is considered to be administered. It also gives information whether it brings more positive or negative effects.

II. METHOD

This study involved students and teachers. The students were the ninth-graders of one state junior high school in Semarang, Indonesia. Since there are eight classes in the school, the researchers took two students from each class as the representative of the class. All of the students participated in this study were taken

randomly. To select the student participants, the researchers were helped by the teacher. Another subject being studied was the teachers who taught in that school. They were two teachers of ninth-graders. To collect the data, the researchers used questionnaire and interview sheet as the instruments of data collection.

In this research, the researcher wanted to describe the washback of English national examination viewed from the teachers’ and the students’ perceptions. Therefore, the descriptive qualitative method was used. Referring to Creswell (2009), qualitative research is the tool to interpret and analyze someone’s meaning of the social/human problem.

III. FINDINGS

After conducting the research, it was found that the washback of the English national examination according to the EFL students’ and the teachers’ perceptions is both positive and negative washback. The participants stated that they agree washback of the English national examination has impact either positive and negative ones.

Students’ perceptions of the English national examination

Pan (2009) asserts that positive washback happens when a test is able to motivate the students to work harder to improve their learning. In this research, the positive washback of the national examination is indicated by the students’ statements that the national examination makes them study harder than they usually do. The national examination triggers the learners to change their study habit. The changing of learning habit to prepare the exam happened in the ninth grade. They do a lot of exercises every day to support their national examination preparation. They even join a tutoring program outside school to help them prepare it better. On the other hand, they pay their full attention to the teacher’s teaching in class because they know that the materials are important for them later when they take the national examination. This is in line with Cheng, Watanabe, and Curtis’s (2004) statement that positive washback means the positive attitude of both teachers and students towards examination that make them work willingly and collaboratively towards its objectives. It is clearly seen from the fact at the national examination makes the students willingly study without being forced by anyone because they are aware of the importance of it for them.

Therefore, considering the positive effect brought by the national examination, the students against the idea of the national examination moratorium because in their opinion the national examination is helpful to trigger them studying a lot and it can be used as the

benchmark of their ability in mastering the materials that they have already got in school.

Nevertheless, the national examination not only brings positive washback but also the negative one. The finding shows that in spite of the fact that the national examination is no longer used as the graduation determiner, the students still consider it as an important test. As a result, it brings anxiety to the students. This anxiety exists because even though the national examination is not used as the students' graduation determiner, it is used to enter senior high school level. If they want to enter into a good academic qualified senior high school, of course, they have to get high graduate average score in their national examination.

From the interview result, it was found that the students were willing to study harder to get high score. However, the students admit that they spent most of their time to study only the national examination subjects. They paid full attention to the national examination subjects, but as a result, less attention to the non-national examination subjects. The students also explained that they studied by doing exercises of the previous test items, in the form of multiple choice type based on the national examination table of specification. This way of study is the negative effect of a test that makes the students who only study the discrete point of knowledge being tested (Pan, 2009). This way of learning only achieves the short-term goal of passing the test which as a result prevents the students to develop their knowledge towards the materials, but only the questions.

Teachers' perceptions of the English national examination

It was found that the English national examination brings both positive and negative washback viewed from the teachers' perceptions. Even though the ratio is not exactly equal, but overall the positive and the negative have the same portion as believed by the teachers.

The positive washback of the national examination for the teachers is that it motivates them to equip the students with the best learning materials that are useful for the students to be ready to face the national examination. Because of the longing to make the students get a good score for their national examination, the teachers try their best for teaching the students by presenting the materials by using varied methods, techniques, and books to make the students able to understand the materials well and also having fun at class.

It was also found that based on the interview result, the teachers in this study did not experience difficulties in teaching materials of national exam. They did not feel under pressure even though they had to teach the ninth-grade students who would face the

examination. It is believed by the teachers that giving the best to make the students able to understand the materials is more important above all. For that reason, the teachers do not focus on targeting on a high English score on the national examination, but they focus on making the students comprehend the materials given.

However, the positive washback is always accompanied by negative one. The teachers admitted that since the national examination only examine students' reading and writing skills, the teachers give an emphasis on the materials of reading and writing skills, not listening and speaking. They admitted that in the beginning of the semester, they only teach listening and speaking skills. However, approaching the administration of the national examination, they focused only on reading and listening skills, which as a result, neglected the speaking and listening skills.

Furthermore, the teachers described that because they taught not only ninth-grade students but also the seven and eight graders, it was hard for them to give their time to the students equally. In short, when the national examination is coming, the teachers only focus on teaching the ninth-grade students which make them have to leave the seventh and eighth graders with only some exercises to be done. In addition, due to the special treatment of national examination as an important test by the school, it raises a discrepancy between the non-national examination teachers and the national examination teachers because of the much attention given by the school management in preparing the national examination subjects. It leads to the emergence of jealousy non-national examination teachers to the national examination subject teachers because they do not get the same attention.

IV. DISCUSSION

Washback is the test effect toward the teaching and learning process (Hughes, 1989, p. 1). In Indonesia, the national examination that has been administered to determine the students' mastery of the subject tested always gives impact, either positive or negative.

Based on the study, the teachers show positive attitudes by trying their best in delivering the materials for the students. They provide books and even a lot of exercises to facilitate the students in the study. The teachers also try a lot of techniques and methods to make the students understand easily and not getting bored in class. Not only the teachers, the students also show positive attitudes in preparing the test by studying harder than they usually do. Pan (2009) stated that the positive washback happens when a test makes the students being motivated to achieve a good score by increasing their learning activity. It is found that in preparing the national examination, the students admit that they became more focus in class in order to pay

attention to the teachers. They also studied every day at home, even when they were not asked by their parents. They even join a tutoring program to help them get ready in facing the national examination.

However, the national examination also brings negative effect. As stated by Pan (2009) the negative washback appeared in the classroom setting when (1) the teachers teach by using ‘teaching to the test’ method that makes them narrow the curriculum. (2) The test makes the students and the teachers anxious and change their performance in facing the test, (3) Students only learn several points of knowledge being tested in the test, but not the real-life knowledge, and (4) Studying only nearing the due date test will make the students have a negative practice of washback toward the test and reduce their study motivation.

Based on what Pan (2009) stated about the negative washback, in this study, almost all of Pan’s statements about the negative washback characteristics happened to the school being studied. It was also found that in teaching the ninth-grade, at first the teachers taught all the skills equally. Nevertheless, approaching the national examination administration, the teachers focused on reading and writing skills because speaking and listening were not tested in the national examination. The fact was in line with Alderson and Wall (1993) said that regarding to the content of teaching, the result of the negative washback of a test is shown when the teachers spend the limited time left to practice reading and writing rather than listening and speaking because they realize that the other skills are not assessed in the test.

Another result of the interview regarding the students’ perception was the feeling of anxiety of preparing the examination administration. Again, the term testing learning driving force seems to be one occurrence in every individual who is being a test taker of national examination. This result can be categorized as negative washback since the focus of learning is not compatible with what has been written in the purposes of competence should be achieved by the learners in the curriculum.

V. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that the English national examination administration brings both positive and negative washback based on the students’ perception.

The positive washback of students’ perception is indicated by the students who can improve their study intensity and concern more on the materials given by the teachers in their classroom. Stated by Pan (2009),

positive washback happens when the test motivates the students to work harder to have a sense of accomplishment and thus enhance learning. Based on the data collected, it showed the students’ admission that their motivation to study improved significantly during the national examination preparation. The indication of students’ study improvement can be seen by the increment of the study time they spent in their house and their attentiveness during the English class due to their realization of the importance of national examination result. However, the positive washback comes together with the negative one. In accordance with the data being collected, the result shows that in spite of the fact that the national examination is no longer used as graduation determiner, the students still consider it as an important test that, as a result, brings anxiety to the students. Furthermore, the importance of the national examination makes the students pay their full attention to the national examination subjects, and as a result, neglect the non-national examination subjects. They also study only based on exercises of the national examination which shorten their knowledge toward the material only to the table of specification of national examination, not all of the material being taught in school.

For the teachers, the national examination also brings positive and negative effect to them. For the positive one, the national examination triggers them to be able to serve the students with the best material. It triggers them to make the students able to understand the material well by using a lot of teaching technique, media, and methods to make the students having fun in the teaching-learning process. However, this positive effect brings together the negative one. It is found that the national examination makes the teachers only focus on the reading and writing skills in teaching the students because they are the only skills being tested in the national examination. The teachers also admit that because they have to focus on teaching the ninth-grade students near the national examination implementation, they sometimes have to leave the seventh and eighth grade class, with only an exercise to do, to teach the ninth-grade students. The teachers also admit that because the students consider the national examination as an important test that makes them pay more attention to the national examination subjects, it raises a discrepancy between the teachers due to the emergence of jealousy from the non-national examination teachers.

VI. SUGGESTION

Considering the research findings that show the washback of the national examination brings both positive and negative effects, there are some suggestions proposed by the researcher as follows. For the teacher, it is found that the national examination

makes the teachers teach the students in the national-examination orientation. Since the national examination of junior high school focuses only on the reading and writing skills, it makes the teachers only emphasize the reading and writing skills and give less attention to the speaking and listening one. In fact, it should not be happening because the four skills of mastering English are equally important. In short, it will be much better if the same portion in teaching is given by providing four English skills.

For the students, the national examination makes them study unequally toward the national and non-national examination subjects. It should not be happening because all of the subjects are important. The time management should be experienced by the students to prepare all materials given based on the purposes to be achieved in learning.

Referring to the interview of teachers and students as test takers and related to the administration, the use of computer-based test since 2017 is a good blow for school's stakeholders. Indeed the computer-based test brings positive effects such as making the test more effective in its administration, although they mentioned that the weakness is on the facility of computer availability.

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