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THE BACKWASH EFFECT OF POST-GRADUATE STUDY ENTRANCE TEST ON ENGLISH COMPETENCE OF CANDIDATE ACADEMICS

Deastika Sudjasmara

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

deastika@gmail.com

Abstract: This research is a case study at an education university in Bandung. It is conducted to investigate whether post-graduate entrance tests on English competence create any backwash effect on candidate academics learning behavior and identify how the test shapes the learning experience. This research employs a case study with qualitative approach, involving 25 newly graduated bachelor degree students of five different departments of an education university in Bandung. Questionnaire is employed to gain the data. The results reveal that regarding the type of the test, post-graduate entrance test has a positive effect on candidate academics. This kind of test types leads the candidate academics to a positive language learning behavior. The candidate academics spend more time in studying and prepare the test by practicing reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar. However, the type of the test which is in the form of multiple-choice directs point of view of the learners on the tests to be negative since the test doesn't represent the candidate academics' skills.

Keywords: backwash effect, candidate academics, post-graduate entrance test

INTRODUCTION

Almost all universities in the world use high-stake test to evaluate their candidate academics. It is employed to make important decisions whether the candidate academics are accepted or not in the university. Therefore, this test can influence every facet of students' lives and affect their future life and their academic career (Mousavi & Amiri, 2011). Thus, analyzing the backwash effect will be necessary for them who take the test, organizations which designs tests, and other institutions that use the tests.

Recently, the growth of high-stake standardized testing is increasing and getting important since it is used to determine an important decision about students or institutions, mostly related to accountability, such as assessing individual's competence for a certain objective (Özmen, 2011). As well as high-stake test, in recent years, many researchers have also been focused on the effect of testing on teaching and learning

process, or most people call it as “backwash” or “washback” (Prodromou, 1995) ; Gates 1995, as cited in Brown & Yamashita, 1995). Several studies have been conducted on the backwash effect of tests in varied contexts; yet there is only little attention to the high-stakes university entrance exams (Salehi & Yunus, 2012).

In Turkey, Yildirim (2010) investigated the effects of the English Component of the Foreign Language University Entrance Exam (ECFLUEE) on future EFL teachers’ language proficiencies. The results find that the exam has some negative backwash effects on the students’ language proficiency and performance in their first year classes at university. The same result is also found by Otaka (2011) on his research about the backwash effect of the entrance test on English language education in Japan. Similarly, Mousavi & Amiri (2011) on their research also indicate that TEFL MA university entrance exam has an insignificant effect on the students’ academic behavior . Students show very little interest in the test in spite of being aware of its importance. However, the result of the study also finds that TEFL MA university entrance exam which is in the form of multiple choices does not encourage score pollution practice.

To see the backwash effect of the same kind of test in Indonesia, particularly in Bandung, a study is then conducted. The aims of this study are to investigate whether post-graduate entrance tests on English competence create any backwash effect on candidate academics learning behavior and identify how the test shapes the learning experience. The English competence test itself includes 60 multiple-choice items. The students are given 90 minutes to complete the answers, as required by this session of the test. The items are regarding grammatical points, vocabulary items, a short cloze passage and short reading passages followed by some multiple-choice comprehension questions.

Finally, the study is expected to give contributions to those who take the test, organizations designing tests, and other institutions that use the tests. For test takers or candidate academics, hopefully it will provide information about the backwash effect of the post-graduate study entrance test on English competence so that they can prepare the same kind of test better. Meanwhile, for the students, it will provide information that can be used to adjust and decide kinds of test used in post-graduate study entrance test on English competence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

High-stake university tests wield a strong impact on language learners who are arranging to take these tests (Spolsky, 1994, as cited in Bailey, 1999). Actually, backwash effect of high stake university tests has been widely discussed. There are various ideas from several researchers about the concept of backwash. Hughes (2003) simply defines that backwash is the effect of testing on teaching and learning. In a broad view, Cohen (1994) defines backwash as an effect posed by assessment instruments which shape educational practices and beliefs. However, the term backwash effect is neutral; it can be positive or beneficial effects or too dangerous or negative effects (Bachman & Palmer, 2009; Buck, 1988; Hughes, 2003). Hughes (2003) proposes some points to promote beneficial backwash those are:

1. Test the competencies whose development you want to encourage
2. Sample widely and unpredictably
3. Use direct testing
4. Make testing criterion-referenced

5. Base achievement on objectives
6. Ensure that students and teachers know and really understand the test
7. Provide assistance to teachers, where it is needed

Buck (1988) then describes backwash as follows:

“There is a natural tendency for both teachers and students to tailor their classroom activities to the demands of the test, especially when the test is very important to the future of the students, and pass rates are used as a measure of teacher success. This influence of the test on the classroom (referred to as *washback* by language testers) is, of course, very important; this washback effect can be either beneficial or harmful.”

In this study, the backwash effect will be discussed in relation with the learners or often called the test takers. In relation to the test takers, Shohamy (1992) describe backwash as “the utilization of external language tests to affect and drive foreign language learning in the school context”. Shohamy notes that “this phenomenon is the result of the strong authority of external testing and the major impact has on the lives of test takers”. Another concept of backwash is proposed by Davies (1995), who says that backwash effect which focuses on the basic knowledge and the content of the test shapes the choices of the students from the curricular content and of learning strategies.

To add, Alderson et al., (1995) suggest some hypotheses which is hoped will bring the backwash to an improvement lead to investigations related to the test takers:

- A test can impact learning
- A test will affect what learners learn; and
- A test will affect how learners learn
- Rate and sequence of learning would be affected by the test
- Degree and depth of learning would be influenced by the test
- A test will affect attitudes to the material, strategy, etc
- Tests with important consequences will have washback; and conversely
- Tests that do not have important consequences will have no washback
- There will be no washback on tests that do not have important consequences
- For some learners and teachers, tests will have washback effects, but not for others

Meanwhile, according to Bachman & Palmer (2009), people who take the test or test takers can be influenced by (1) “the experience of taking and, in some cases, 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 the test”. In previous article, Bailey (1996) suggests that students who cope with an important test might participate in the following processes:

- Practicing items with similar format just like on the test
- Learning vocabulary and grammar rules
- Joining on interactive language practice (e.g., target language conversations)
- Reading thoroughly in the target language.
- Listening to non-interactive language (radio, television, practice tapes, etc.).
- Applying strategies for test-taking
- Registering in test-preparation courses.
- Asking for guidance in their studying and input on their outcomes
- Asking for unscheduled tutorials or test-preparation classes (in addition to or in lieu of other language classes).
- Skipping language classes to study for the test.

Evidently, financial aspect also affects student learning strategies in preparing a test. Ingulsrud (1994, as cited in Hill & Parry, 1994) states that:

“For students who are serious about entering a highly ranked university, a considerable amount of coaching is normal in preparing for the entrance examination. High-school students spend evenings, weekends, and even vacations preparing for the test at the various juku [exam preparation schools] that provide a range of coaching services. Supplemental education of this kind their families are willing to make such sacrifices. If they do well, they are assured of a place in a prestigious university, which, in turn, leads to a successful career in business or government.”

Talking about preparation, in contrast, based on research conducted by Shohamy (1992), it is showed that 54% of the higher level students reported an effortful preparation for the test. 86% of the students thought the English language test will affect the score better, and 70% of the student respondents believed that the results of the English language test will affect their achievement in the next studies. From the research, it is also found that 68% of the students claimed that learning process was encouraged by the tests and 92% said that the objective of the test was to encourage learning. From Hughes (2003), it is pointed out that the main issue regarding the products of backwash is whether or not it contributes to learning. Another research conducted by Cheng (1997), it reports that an exam plays “a 30% role in their learning” followed by the effect of future jobs, their parents' concerns, and rivalry with their classmates.

Regarding the entrance tests, they are mostly presented in multiple-choice questions. Multiple-choice questions themselves have their own advantages and disadvantages. Babo et al. (2020) state that multiple-choice tests can only assess limited type of knowledge. However, it is often chosen because of it is more reasonable for testing a large number of test-takers, not because of the type of skills or knowledge being assessed. Related to scoring, Moss (2001) says that scoring of multiple-choice questions is easy and reliable, and it permits bigger sampling of student's knowledge in a test with more efficient time. McCoubrie (2004) also agrees that multiple-choice question based tests are reliable because they are time-efficient. On the other hand, by using multiple-choice test, student who cannot answer a particular question can simply select an answer randomly and still have a chance of getting score for it. There is typically a 25% probability of getting it right on a four-answer choice question if an answer is randomly guessed. For students with little time remain, it is common practice to give random answer to all remaining questions with an expectation that they will get some of them correct. However, some certain tests use negative system where the test takers have no more advantageous to choose a random answer than to give none. The English competence test investigated in this study is also in the form of multiple-choice. The students' response will give brief explanation about how it affects their learning experiences.

To sum up, even if backwash effect of high stake test is considered as an important thing, there is still little research on backwash in relation to the test takers' behavior before and after tests. However, from this literature review, it is showed that there are various points of view about what the theory may cover. It then makes testing backwash has been widely discussed. Moreover, backwash effect is neutral; it can give positive or beneficial effect as well as negative or harmful effect.

METHOD

The study used case study research design to investigate whether the tests created any backwash effect on candidate academics learning behavior and to find out how the test shaped the learning experience. The case study design with qualitative method was introduced in this study to address questions which were focused more on personal experience, personal feedback and reflection.

The site of this research was one of universities in Bandung. Five newly graduated bachelor degree students from five different departments as candidate academic of post-graduate study were selected as the respondent of this study. Twenty-five persons in total were involved in this study. The term ‘candidate academic’ itself referred to those who intend to enter post-graduate study in any major. The respondents were selected purposively as the sample of this study. The sample were restricted to newly graduated bachelor degree students who had only taken the university entrance test once. This criterion was set to make sure that they were in the same level and had a same learning period before taking the test. The respondents were also restricted to those from non-English department. The second criterion was set in order to find out how the English test influenced the way they learned since they were going to use English frequently while they were accepted and even graduated.

In this research, the data were collected by using questionnaire adopted from Bailey (1996, 1999) and Özmen (2011). In this study, the questionnaire contained 20-items of close question with and 2-items of open question. On the close questions, the students were required to choose ‘yes’ or ‘no’ which best represented their response to the items. The close questions were used because it prescribed the range of responses from which the respondent might choose, it was also quick to complete and straightforward, whereas open questions were used to enable the respondents giving their responses which were not available on the statements (L. Cohen et al., 2003).

At first, after questionnaires were distributed to the respondents, the data from close questions of the questionnaire were scored. Score 0 was given for no and 1 for yes. Then, the response frequencies were calculated. After calculating the response frequencies, the data of each question were arranged from the biggest calculation to the least. Then, the results of the questionnaire were classified based on the category. Categorization of the questionnaire items was based on how it answered the research questions. Questions number one to ten answered the first research questions while the questions number 11 to 20 answered the second research question.

Table 1. Questionnaire Statements

| 1st Research Question Statements Category | 2nd Research Question Statements Category |
|--|---|
| Post-graduate entrance test is very important for me | The post-graduate entrance test in the form of multiple-choice question makes me put more effort in terms of preparation. |
| Types of test in the English competence section of post-graduate entrance test influences the way I study English. | The post-graduate entrance test leads to an increase in the amount of time spend studying. |

| | |
|---|--|
| Post-graduate entrance test in the form of multiple-choice question is an effective test type for post-graduate study entrance test. | The post-graduate entrance test leads to an increase in the amount of practicing similar items in format to those on the test. |
| Post-graduate entrance test in the form of multiple-choice question gives candidate opportunity to show his/her academic English skill and knowledge. | Post-graduate entrance test in the form of multiple-choice question leads to an increase in the amount of studying grammar |
| Post-graduate entrance test in the form of multiple-choice question is good for showing candidate's academic English skill and knowledge. | Post-graduate entrance test in the form of multiple-choice question leads to an increase in the amount of studying vocabulary |
| Post-graduate entrance test in the form of multiple-choice question shows candidate's strength and weaknesses. | Post-graduate entrance test in the form of multiple-choice question leads to an increase in the amount of reading widely in the target language. |
| Post-graduate entrance test in the form of multiple-choice question indicates the extents of candidate's achievement | Post-graduate entrance test leads me to join a test-preparation course. |
| Post-graduate entrance test helps candidate to learn and improve his/her academic English skill and knowledge. | Post-graduate entrance test leads me to enroll guidance in my studying and feedback on my performance. |
| I know what I should learn to get a good mark on the post-graduate entrance test. | Post-graduate entrance test leads me to use of resource book |
| Post-graduate entrance test in the form of multiple-choice question assists in setting fair and reliable grades. | Post-graduate entrance test in the form of multiple-choice question makes me put more effort in terms of answering the <u>questions.</u> |

(Adapted from: Bailey, 1999; Bailey, 1996; Ozmen, 2011)

After finished with the close questions, the answers of the open question were analyzed. The information collected were attributed to some theories related to backwash effect. The data gained were then interpreted into findings as a descriptive report to support the data from questionnaire. At the end, all the answers of the questionnaire were described and interpreted into qualitative descriptions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section is structured in terms of the research objectives, which means the following two subtitles are also the objectives that have led the study. The first objective is to investigate whether post-graduate entrance tests on English competence create any backwash effect on candidate academics learning behavior and identify how the test shapes the learning experience.

Backwash effect of post-graduate entrance tests on English competence of the candidate academics' learning behavior

Selection process of university in Indonesia is very competitive. Some companies recruit employees almost from universities with excellent accreditation. Thus, pass the university entrance tests is considered important. This study shows the same thing; almost all respondents perceived that the post-graduate entrance test is important for

them. It is supported by the result from a research conducted by Shohamy (1992) which shows that 82% of the students see the test as very important since it will affect their future education. This study also shows that there is backwash effect of the post-graduate entrance test on English competence of candidate academics. It can be seen from the answers that more than three-quarter of the respondent state that the tests influence the way they learn English. More than half of them say that the entrance test helps them to learn and improve their academic English skills and knowledge. It shows that there is a positive direction of washback; it triggers the candidate academics' motivation to learn harder in order to attain their goal. Some of the respondent say that they employ many strategies to pass the test, such as joining learning group and practicing similar test items. A research conducted by Huang (2019) also find that language testing promotes language learning.

Although most of the respondents think that the entrance test is important and it will affect their academic behavior, on the other hand, their view on the type of the test tends to be negative. The content of English competence tests on the post-graduate selection process tends to be literary, covering such area like grammar and vocabulary. The test is presented in the form of multiple-choice. Three-quarter of the respondents say that the type of the test which is in multiple-choice question is not an effective type for post-graduate entrance test. Most of them also say that the multiple choice questions do not show the candidate academics' strengths and weaknesses in language ability. In this study, it is also showed that only a quarter of the respondents agree if the multiple-choice questions give them opportunity to show their academic English skills and knowledge. Several students do not prepare the test that well and take it calmly. On his research, Mahmud (2018) states that students' perceptions of the test form their objectives and influence language learning strategies while preparing the test. They do not take the test too serious since in multiple choice question, the answer is already there. When they do not even know the answer, they can actually choose an answer randomly.

It is in line with Zeidner (1987) and Traub & McRury (1990, as cited in Ingenkamp & Jäger, 1985) who say that multiple-choice question does not really represent students' language ability. It only fits for some context and some language features. Babo et al. (2020) state that multiple-choice tests can only assess limited type of knowledge. However, it is often chosen because of it is more reasonable for testing a large number of test-takers, not because of the type of skills or knowledge being assessed. However, while the respondents of this study are asked about what kind of test is suitable for testing English competence on a university selection process, most of them answer the combination of multiple-choice and interview is the most suitable type of tests. It represents both practical and theoretical skills of the test-takers.

Moreover, most of the respondents agree that multiple-choice question does not indicate the extents of candidate's achievement. It is the same as what is said by Babo et al. (2020) that multiple-choice question will not fairly represent true achievement. However, some of them still believe that the entrance test which is in the form of multiple-choice assists in setting fair and reliable grades. Moss (2001) says that scoring of multiple-choice questions is easy and reliable, and it permits bigger sampling of student's knowledge in a test with more efficient time. McCoubrie (2004) also agrees that multiple-choice question based tests are reliable because they are time-efficient.

The way post-graduate study entrance test shapes language learning experiences of candidate academics

The study shows that the post-graduate study entrance test shapes language learning experiences of candidate academics in various ways. Since the entrance test is considered important, they adjust their learning strategies for it. It is the same as the result of study conducted by Mahmoudi (2015). The study reveals that university entrance tests affect the students learning process.

Regarding the learning experience, the study shows a positive effect. It is found that most of the candidate academics put more effort in terms of test preparation. They spend more time in studying the test. Bloxham & Boyd (2007) indicate that tests of a particular subject have a big impact on student activity. It effects the method that the students used on their learning; one of them is about how much time they spend in studying the test.

Since the type of test is multiple-choice, some of the candidate academics prepare the test by practicing reading comprehension (60%), vocabulary (56%), grammar (44%) and similar items in format to those on the test (62%). The results of this study are the same as stated by Akpinar & Cakildere (2013), high-stake tests have positive washback effect on reading skills of the candidate academics and negative washback effect on writing, listening and speaking skills. They are ignored by the candidate academics since these skills are not tested. However, Iyer (2015) adds that four language skills are better integratedly used for assessing the test takers. Specifically, for speaking skills, it should be included in the test since it is necessary for the candidate academics.

The rest of the respondents prefer to answer the multiple-choice questions without preparation. However, some candidate academics say that the material coverage of the test help them to read and comprehend literatures in English during the study. In this study, it also reveals that those who conduct intensive learning, about half of the respondents, prefer to buy some books in the same format and ask for feedback from their peers. Ramezaney (2014) investigates that in preparing a test for English competence on university selection process, students spend their time on learning vocabulary in context and other areas such as grammatical structures, reading passages, etc. Teemant (2010) on his article also says that students who recognized his lack of study skills as obstacles to his academic achievement tend to be more prepared while dealing with kind of high-stake tests.

Half of the respondents even say that post-graduate entrance test leads them to join a test-preparation course. Some of them think that the tests lead them to enroll guidance and feedback in their studying. It is supported by Mahmoudi (2015) on his study who says that some students need to join for test-preparations classes for several times because they less practice in answering multiple-choice questions. They think that joining test preparation class is one of test-taking strategies to pass the test.

However, only some of the respondents say that the test which is conducted in the form of multiple-choice question make them put more effort in terms of answering the questions. It means that they do not consider multiple-choice question as hard. As stated by Teemant (2010) that multiple-choice is the easiest test for students to do. They think that on the multiple-choice question, the correct answer is above them. Even if they do not know the answer, they just need to choose randomly one of several options. If you know the material, then you can do it very well.

CONCLUSION

Several studies on backwash effect in language testing have been developing due to its influence on learning behavior. This study has given several insights related washback effect of post-graduate study entrance test on English competence of candidate academics. Practically, the study brings awareness on the importance of English competence assessment on a post-graduate study entrance test as seen on the result of this study. It reveals that the test encourages the candidate academics preparing the test better and learning harder. The findings show that the post-graduate study entrance test on English competence have positive effect on candidate academics' strategy to language learning. The candidate academics spend more time in studying and prepare the test by practicing reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar.

Theoretically, this study enhances literature on washback related to candidate academics' perceptions of the test. The study shows that the candidate academics' perceptions of a test will influence its washback. The finding of the current research found that if it is seen from the students' point of view on the test types, the English competence section on post-graduate entrance test had a negative impact on candidate academics. It is mostly related to the type of the test which is a multiple-choice question. Students think that multiple-choice question is not an effective type test since the result of the test does not represent the candidate academics' skill and knowledge. Several students do not even take the English test seriously; they consider that in multiple-choice questions, the answer is already there. When they do not even know the answer, they can actually choose one answer randomly. Therefore, the findings suggest that the English competence section on post-graduate study entrance test provides the candidate academics with an opportunity to practice their four language skills. It will be beneficial for the candidate academics since they not only will practice new language skills while preparing the test, but they will also improve their other language skills, which will support them during their study and after graduation as well.

Several suggestions are also recommended for candidate academics as test takers and further researchers. For test takers or candidate academics, it is suggested to use provided information about the backwash effect of the post-graduate study entrance test on English competence to prepare the same kind of test better. The last, it is suggested for further researchers to involve larger respondents from more than five departments in order to get better findings that will represent the study better.

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