

# Negative Washback Created by the University Examination on Teachers

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**Abstract:** A sword that can save some may kill others. In the same way if tests are not understood properly and administered reliably, they can harm the learners as well as the teachers. Scholars and lay people alike have long realized that a major purpose of language is communication, but language as communication, rather than as form, was not taught intensively until recent decades. The teachers teach numerous patterns and dialogues of English, all the terminology for parts of speech, and can recite the grammatical rules in the book. They make their students to score high marks in the examinations, but, when they are thrown into a real communication situation, they are often lost. They are unable to express themselves in times of need. The problem is that the teachers have trained their students to answer in the examination but are never instructed as to how, when, or with whom to use such patterns, dialogues, parts of speech and grammatical rules (Gregory & Carroll, 1978). Thus the University examination today has not created a positive washback in teaching but it has created negative washback in teaching. That is, the teachers teach to the test and not to develop the skills.

**Index Terms:** Washback, negative washback, examination

## I. Introduction

A sword that can save some may kill others. In the same way if tests are not understood properly and administered reliably, they can harm the learners as well as the teachers. Scholars and lay people alike have long realized that a major purpose of language is communication, but language as communication, rather than as form, was not studied intensively until recent decades. They have learned numerous patterns and dialogues, know all the terminology for parts of speech, and can recite the grammatical rules in the book. They are able to score high marks in the examinations, but, when they are thrown into a real communication situation, they are often lost. They are unable to express themselves in times of need. The problem is that they have learned to answer the questions through their memory but are never instructed as to how, when, or with whom to use such patterns, dialogues, parts of speech and grammatical rules (Gregory & Carroll, 1978). Thus the present examination pattern does not in any way promote the kind of teaching that focuses on communicative competence of the students. It creates a negative washback resulting in teaching no skills. The teachers are worried about all the time in teaching to the test. This research brings to light how the ESL teachers are driven by the examination yielding to the negative washback.

## II. Washback on the Teaching Methodology of the ESL College Teachers by the Existing Examination

The data collected from 100 teachers of English as a second language teaching at the undergraduate level in different colleges in both the rural and urban areas of Sivagangai and Ramnad districts were analysed by employing the descriptive and contextual methods. In addition, the teachers' responses to the questionnaire were computed and analysed using the SPSS programme module. The statistical measurements used here included the mean and standard deviations for each item of the questionnaire.

The statements assessing the expected responses of the participants were adopted through a five-point Likert Scale. On the scale, the statements were coded as follows: 1 indicating 'Strongly Agree', 2 'Agree', 3 'No Opinion', 4 'Disagree' and 5 indicating 'Strongly Disagree'. The mean scores of each of the items of the questionnaire follow - mean scores 5-3.5 suggesting 'strong effect', mean scores 3.49-2.5 suggesting 'moderate effect', mean scores 2.49-1.5 implying 'little effect', and mean scores 1.49-1 indicating 'insignificant effect'.

The table below demonstrates the mean scores and standard deviations of each of the items of the questionnaire, and hence the degree of effect that the university semester examination relations of Washback to the Teachers of English as a Second Language

had on the syllabus and curriculum, tasks and activities, materials, and teaching methods and techniques as perceived by the ESL teachers as exhibited in different figures below:

**Table - 1**  
*Washback in Teaching Methodology of the Teachers Mean and Standard Deviation*

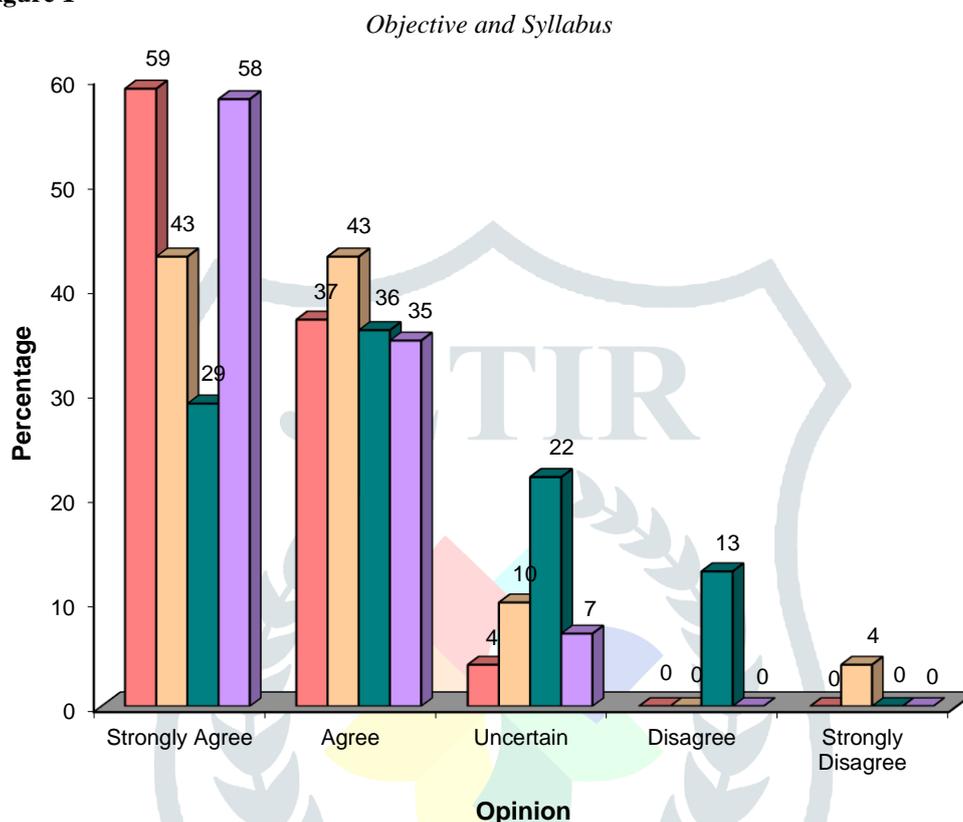
Item No.	Questions	Mean	SD
1	I am well informed of the objectives of the syllabus and curriculum for English language education at the college level	4.55	0.49
2	I teach everything in the syllabus and curriculum although something may not be tested	4.21	1.40
3	I teach some lessons that are less likely to be tested in the examination	3.81	1.64
4	I use some relevant contents to help my students perform well in the examination	4.51	0.97
5	I spend much time teaching grammar because grammar is more likely to be tested in the examination.	4.10	1.15
6	I design my classroom activities according to my students' needs and abilities.	1.92	4.07
7	I teach whatever I think is important to teach, no matter whether it is tested or not.	2.40	3.35
8	I teach what is tested in the examination because the students expect me to do so.	4.02	1.02
9	I use communicative materials to develop the language ability of my students though they are not tested.	1.71	1.33
10	I advise my students to practice the questions of the previous examinations for relatively better preparations for the examination.	4.25	1.23
11	I give students model questions predicted to be set in the examination.	4.28	1.15
12	I use authentic materials in addition to the textbook to teach the English language.	1.97	1.41
13	I use the teaching methods and techniques that help my students succeed in the examination.	4.32	1.03
14	I prefer teaching test-taking strategies when the examination is near.	4.13	1.07
15	My EFL teaching methods and techniques are influenced by the examination.	3.61	1.09
16	I try to achieve the test objectives throughout teaching the English language	4.00	1.23

## 2.1 Objective and syllabus

Item No.	Questions	Mean	SD
1	I am well informed of the objectives of the syllabus and curriculum for English language education at the college level	4.55	0.49
2	I teach everything in the syllabus and curriculum although something may not be tested	4.21	1.40
3	I teach some lessons that are less likely to be tested on the examination	3.81	1.64

Item No.	Questions	Mean	SD
4	I use some relevant contents to help my students perform well in the examination	4.51	0.97

Figure 1



It was evident that the contents of a test had a direct washback effect either positively or negatively upon the syllabus and curriculum as found by Alderson and Wall (1993).

The mean score of item no. 1 is 4.55 while the standard deviation is 0.49. It shows that 96% (strongly agree and agree) teachers claimed that they were aware of the objectives of the syllabus as indicated in the book. The teachers said in the focus group interview that the objective given to them was to make every student pass in the examination irrespective of the objectives given for the English as a second language score.

The mean score of Item No. 2 concerned with the syllabus and curriculum is 4.21 whereas the standard deviation is 1.40 this indicates that 86% teachers (agree plus strongly agree) confirmed that they taught everything in the textbook based on the syllabus and curriculum although something might not be tested in the examination. They taught everything because the management demanded that they should complete the syllabus on time so that the students did not complain that they scored less because the entire syllabus was not taught to them.

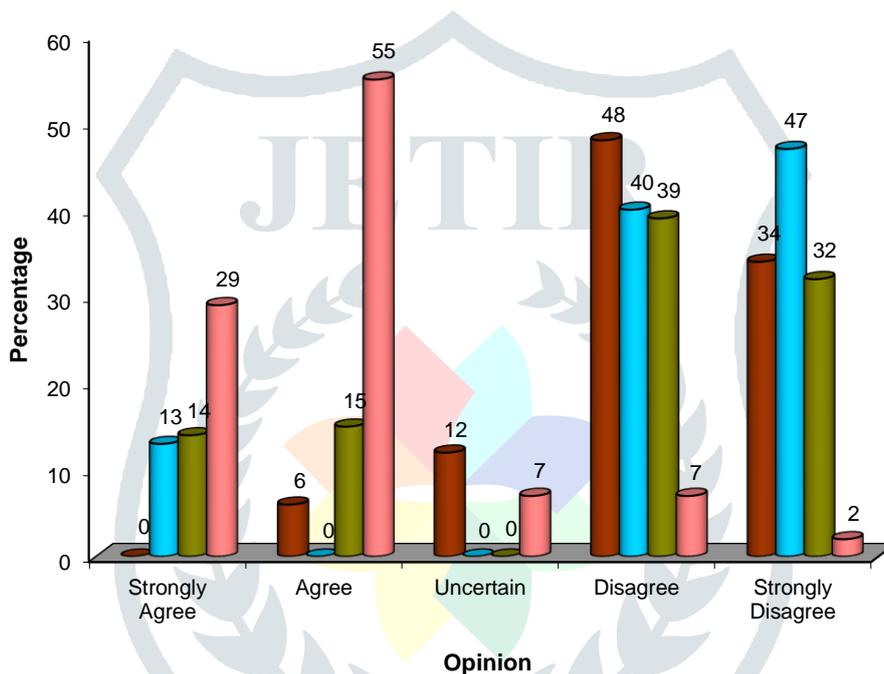
The findings in Item No. 3, indicate that 65% of the teachers support the statement that the teachers’ activities in their classroom were test-oriented. They centred their classes on the lessons and contents relevant to school public examination and the university semester examination.

The mean score of item no. 4 is 4.51 and the standard deviation is 0.97. This statistic clearly indicates that the ESL teachers are affected by the university semester examination. That is, the teachers laid emphasis on the contents that would help the students do well in the examination. These results appear to support the studies carried out by Wall and Alderson (1996), Manjarres (2005) and Tsagari (2007) that the students having good scores in English in the school public examination and the university semester examination were not capable enough to communicate in English in their real life situations.

2.2 Tasks and Activities

Item No.	Questions	Mean	SD
5	I spend more time teaching grammar because grammar is more likely to be tested in the examination	4.10	1.15
6	I design my classroom activities according to my students' needs and abilities.	1.92	4.07
7	I teach whatever I think is important to teach, no matter whether it is tested or not.	2.40	3.35
8	I teach what is tested in the examination because the students expect me to do so.	4.02	1.02

Figure 2  
Tasks and Activities



As the mean score of Item No. 5 is 4.10 while its standard deviation 1.15, it is clear that the perception of classroom activities was related to the contents of the examination. That is, according to Item No. 5, 82% teachers spent more time on teaching grammar because grammar was more likely to be tested in the University examination. Grammar was practised in the form of an essay as it carried 20 marks in the examination. Minimum practice was given with real life situations. That is why the students know that the simple present tense has to be used for habitual action but they are unable to say, “I get up every day at 5’o clock”. They know the rules but cannot use them in communication as they are not required in the examination. Instead of teaching grammar to play a role in using English, it is taught as a set of rules to be memorized.

Item No. 6 displays that only 13% teachers were keen on and conscious of their students’ needs and abilities, and design their classroom activities accordingly. 87% of the teachers agreed that they designed their class room activities to suit the requirements of the examination. Since the mean score of Item No. 6 is 1.92 and its standard deviation is 4.07, it is indicative of the association of the teachers’ attitudes with the examinations’ needs and interests.

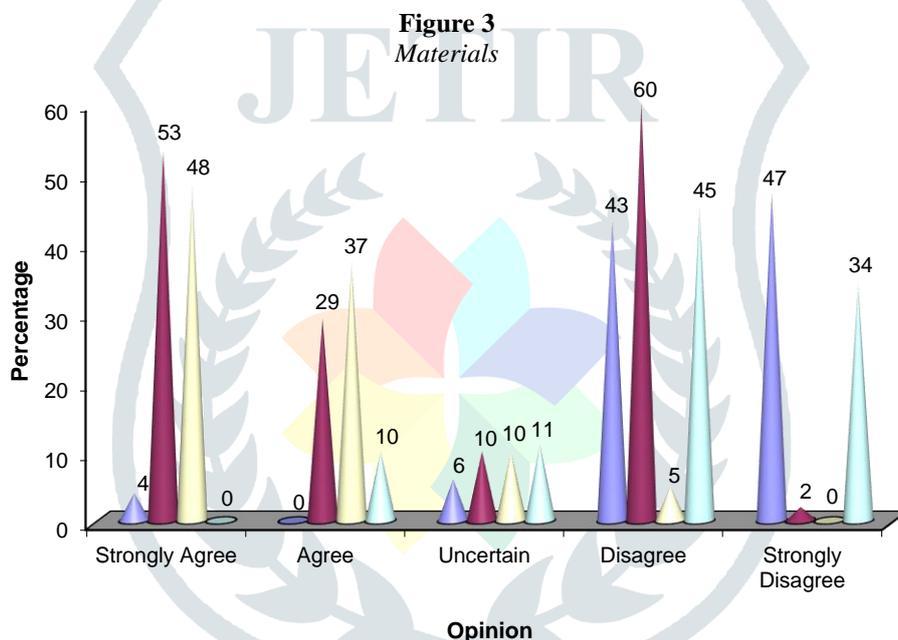
The ESL teaching was test-driven as the findings show that the test affected the teachers’ classroom tasks and activities. There is a general perception among the ESL teachers that the tasks and activities which are not tested in the examination are considered as a wastage of time and labour.

Item No. 7 exhibits that 71% teachers (disagree plus strongly disagree) did not consider the importance of attaining communicative competence of the students, rather they considered whether they taught the items that would be tested. This result is supported by the mean score of Item No. 7 being 2.40 while its standard deviation is 3.35. A lot of time was spent on the content that was more likely to appear in the examination.

Item No. 8 having 4.02 as its mean score and 1.02 as its standard deviation also shows that the teaching of ESL as being directed to the school public examination and university as 84% teachers in Item No. 8 (agree plus strongly agree) taught what would be tested in the examination. The students requested the teacher to teach only the important content with short-cut methods. The students expect the teacher to give them cheap materials that would help them pass the examination easily. The teachers consented to the students' demands.

**2.3 Materials**

Item No.	Questions	Mean	SD
9	I use communicative materials to develop the language ability of my students though they are not tested.	1.71	1.33
10	I advise my students to practice the questions of the previous examinations for relatively better preparations for the examination.	4.25	1.23
11	I give students model questions predicted to be set in the examination.	4.28	1.15
12	I use authentic materials in addition to the textbook to teach the English language.	1.97	1.41



It is a surprise that the mean score 1.71 and the standard deviation 1.33 indicate that the teachers never use communicative materials in the class. 90% of the teachers, as shown in Item No. 9, are lecturers. They talked more and did not encourage the students to interact with them during the class. The only interaction that was available in the classroom was whether they have any question on the content they were taught. Thus the students are made silent spectators in the classroom. It happens because the test focused on the content and not the ability of the students.

The mean and the standard deviation of Item No. 10, 4.25 and 1.23 respectively, indicate the teachers' interest in supplying the students with supplementary material that would help the students pass the examination. The teacher taught only what was in the past year question papers. The slow learners were guided to study only what appears frequently in the previous year question papers. Every library has a separate section in which all the past year question papers are bound and kept safely for the use of the students. The librarian confirms that the students throng to that section especially when examinations draw closer.

The present study is consistent with the study of Caine (2005) in Japan where he found that the teachers were heavily dependent on test papers, model questions, suggestions/guidebooks, called 'hidden syllabus' driven by the content of ESL examinations.

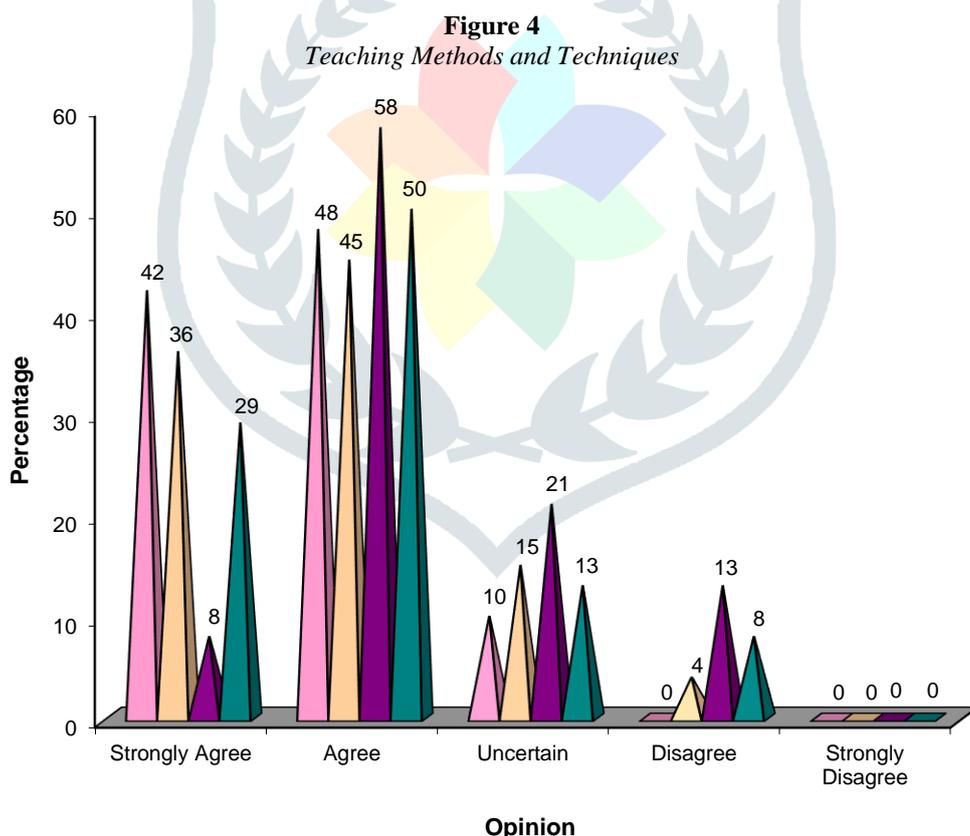
Item No. 11 has 4.28 as its mean score and 1.15 as its standard deviation. It discloses that 85% (agree plus strongly agree) teachers provided the students with model questions predicted to be set in the semester examination. The questions resembled the past year question papers. The wording used in these model question papers also did not change from the past year question papers. The management had instructed every member of the staff to prepare a set of model questions on each unit so that the students got accustomed to the question pattern and prepare themselves accordingly. Such model question papers were repeated in the internal examinations to make students familiar with the examination pattern.

Item No. 12 reveals that 79% (disagree plus strongly disagree) teachers did not supply the students with supplementary materials that would develop and improve their ESL skills.

The findings revealed that the teachers would not teach ESL to their students for the university semester examination. That is, the teachers' use of additional materials and model questions would help their students to prepare well for the university semester examination whereas the use of authentic materials for the development of the students' ESL skills had hardly any relevance to the examination.

**2.4 Teaching Methods and Techniques**

Item No.	Questions	Mean	SD
13	I use the teaching methods and techniques that help my students succeed in the examination.	4.32	1.03
14	I prefer teaching test-taking strategies when the examination is near.	4.13	1.07
15	My EFL teaching methods and techniques are influenced by the examination.	3.61	1.09
16	I try to achieve the test objectives throughout while teaching the English language	4.00	1.23



Item No. 13 has 4.32 as its mean score and 1.03 as its standard deviation and points out that 90% teachers (agree plus strongly agree) used the ESL teaching methods and techniques so as to help their students succeed in the examination. The main focus of the teachers was to make the students pass in the examination as they failed in the subject. The teachers tended to change and modify their teaching methods and techniques with a view to helping their students get adequately prepared to pass in the semester examination.

Item No. 14 demonstrates that 81% teachers (agree plus strongly agree) preferred teaching test-taking strategies to their students when the university semester examination was drawing near.

In addition, teaching test-taking strategies had a strong effect on ESL teaching as the teachers felt that teaching test taking strategies would enhance their students' skills to perform well in the examination.

As Item No. 15 shows, 66% teachers' teaching methods and techniques were influenced by the University semester examinations. Item No. 15 having 3.61 as its mean score and 1.09 as its standard deviation shows that the teachers expected their students to do well in the examination, and hence modified and employed their teaching methods and techniques.

Item No. 16 displays that 79% teachers tried to achieve the test objectives throughout by teaching ESL. The test objective was to make students pass and score good marks so that the management ensured their job continuity in the institution. If students failed in a particular subject, the teacher was asked to quit the job or the salary increment was cut. Fearing loss of job or salary, the teachers always teach to the test.

### III. Conclude

The data confirms that the examination determines the teaching methodology of the ESL teachers at the under graduate level. The teachers teach to the test. The existing examination promoted negative washback on the teaching methodology of the teachers.

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