“You cannot sit in the same time at the same chairs”: Preemptive test washback in Ukrainian EFL classrooms

Sally Behrenwald
Master Student, TESOL Program
Michigan State University
behrenw3@msu.edu

Introduction
“Testuvannya buty! [Let there be testing!]” declared the title of the lead article in the February, 2009 issue of English, a Ukrainian methodological journal for primary and secondary school teachers (Likarchuk, 2009), explaining why foreign languages, including English, had been added to the subjects offered through the system of external independent testing (EIT) for secondary school graduates first implemented in Ukraine in 2008. Although they were developed to help clean up the corruption in Ukrainian higher education, these high-stakes tests have already sparked controversy (Pottroff, 2009).

This qualitative study is part of a larger mixed-methods project looking at Ukrainian EFL teachers’ perceptions of communicative language teaching (CLT; Author, 2010). While I had not originally planned to focus on testing, several of the participants in the study brought up issues connected with the external independent testing of English and how they felt it would influence their teaching, including their use of communicative methods. Although this is a small study looking at only the beginnings of washback, results suggest that external independent testing of foreign languages may cause both positive and negative washback in the teaching of English, even before the first implementation of the test.

Literature Review

Washback
Washback has been defined as the influence of testing, whether positive or negative, on education (Spratt, 2005). This influence can appear either at the classroom level, affecting “teaching and learning” (Bailey, 1996, p. 259), or at the level of educational policy (Wall, 2000). Five areas of classroom washback have been identified: curriculum, materials (which include textbooks), teaching methods, feelings and attitudes, and learning (Spratt, 2005).

High-stakes testing in foreign languages for students finishing secondary school and planning to enter university has become more prevalent worldwide in recent years. Among the countries where washback arising from such tests has been studied are China (Qi, 2005), Estonia (Ekes et al., 2005; Liiv & Alas, 2009), Japan (Wanatabe, 1996), Spain (Amengual-Pizarro, 2009), Sri Lanka (Wall & Alderson, 1993), South Korea (Choi, 2008), and Thailand (Prapphal, 2008). While the washback related to such scenarios has generally been thought of as negative, restricting the curriculum, high-stakes testing in foreign languages has also been seen as “a means of promoting curricular change and educational reform” (Amengual-Pizarro, 2009, p. 582). In Greece and Hungary, educational policy makers are reported to have developed tests in hopes of creating a positive washback
effect in the classrooms (Ekes et al., 2005), while in Sri Lanka, a high-stakes exam was designed in hopes that requiring students to prepare for the test would mean that teachers would take newly developed textbooks and curriculum seriously (Wall & Alderson, 1993). Positive washback which has already resulted from high-stakes testing includes increased attention to reading and writing in Chinese classrooms (Li, 1990, cited in Qi, 2005; however, there has since been a narrowing of the curriculum to emphasize reading and writing at the expense of other skills) and a decrease of instruction in rote memorization in South Korea (Choi, 2008).

One major way that curriculum washback has affected EFL teaching negatively has been in changing the way that teachers teach, as many teachers feel the need to “teach to the test.” In Thailand, concerns that teachers were not only teaching to the test but that large numbers of students spending several years in cram school preparation led to a shift away from only relying on test results to also considering students’ performance in their classes (Prapphal, 2008). Qi (2005) found that in China, a section on a national test which included proofreading exercises, which were designed to teach students that proofreading was a stage of the writing process, led to teachers giving extended, decontextualized instruction about proofreading to their students.

Another area that has been affected by curriculum washback is speaking, leading to teachers reducing the amount of attention paid to speaking in secondary school classrooms (Amengual-Pizarro, 2009; Choi, 2008, Qi, 2005). Choi (2008) reported that in South Korea, the lack of authentic speaking items on the KSAT, a high-stakes test for high school graduates, led to students feeling that it was unnecessary to focus on speaking in high school. Similar results were found in Spain, where teachers said that not only did they devote more time to reading and writing than to speaking, based on the requirements of high-stakes testing for graduates, they also felt that if a speaking component were to be introduced on the test, they would then increase the amount of classroom time spent on oral production (Amengual-Pizzaro, 2009). An exception to this lack of speaking assessment is Estonia, where the English exam for high school graduates includes a speaking task, on which students score higher than on other sections (Liiv & Alas, 2009). Although no study has been done on the role of speaking in Estonian EFL classrooms in regards to this test, Estonia has been reported to view English as “a stepping stone in the economic transition and the integration of Estonia into Europe,” and English-language media is present in many Estonian homes, which may lead to more emphasis on speaking and listening (Fonzari, 1999, p. 41).

Despite recorded instances of both positive and negative washback, not all iterations of tests inevitably lead to washback in all five of Spratt’s (2005) domains. Wall and Alderson (1993) found that in Sri Lanka, while the content that teachers taught in order to prepare their students for their O-levels (standardized exams in specific content areas taken by secondary school students) appeared to change in both positive and negative ways based on the need to prepare for the test, there was no evidence of washback in regards to methodology. They claimed that the teachers continued to teach “the same as they taught before the new examination was introduced” (p. 66).

**The Present Study**

The educational system in Ukraine has undergone several major reforms since independence in 1991. Among these are the implementation of a 12-year program of
primary and secondary education which will replace the current 11-year program\(^1\) (Nordic Recognition Report, 2009); the streamlining of Ukrainian university curriculum to bring it in line with European norms of education as outlined in the Bologna Process (Smotrova, 2009; Stolt, 2008); and the adoption of foreign language teaching from the second grade on, instead of from the fifth, as it had been previously (Smotrova, 2009).

The Ukrainian Ministry of Education has encouraged the use of communicative teaching methods, stating that it feels these methods are necessary for the development of English language skills among students (Smotrova, 2009). Despite interest from teachers, various challenges have been found in implementing communicative methods in Ukraine, and elements of traditional grammar-translation methods are still found in many classrooms (Author, 2010; Scott, 1993; Smotrova, 2009).

In 2008, all Ukrainian students who wished to enter establishments of higher education were required for the first time to take nation-wide exams which were recognized by all universities. These exams were referred to as “external independent testing”, reflecting the fact that they were administered by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science, rather than through any particular educational establishment. All participants were tested in Ukrainian language and literature and could take one other exam as an elective, based on the requirements of the university department they wished to enter (Pottroff, 2009). Foreign languages were not tested in 2008 for two reasons: first, the demand for testing in the original 11 subjects made administration of the test difficult enough as it was, and secondly, the officials in charge of the testing felt that foreign language tests were “genuinely complex” and that they were not yet fully ready at that point to administer them (Likarchuk, 2009, p. 4, my translation). Foreign language testing, including English, was added in 2009 (The National Radio Company of Ukraine, 2008).

Prior to the implementation of the external independent test of English, it was possible to purchase a booklet of practice tests which were recommended by the Ukrainian Ministry of Education and Science (Nesvit, Kovalenko, Kovalenko, & Pukha, 2009). After the test was implemented, the actual questions were made available online at http://www.osvita.org.ua/ukrtest/answer/2009_eng.html; however, only the correct answers were given. The test covered tasks for reading and writing, and question types included multiple choice, true/false, fill in the blank with a word bank, matching, and changing word forms. Topics for the practice tests were extremely varied and included Ukrainian folklore, Native Americans, Polish pea soup, Sarah Bernhardt, electricity, and mummification. Topics for the actual test included personal ads, sailing around the world, online education, applying to college in the United States, native English animals, and the Bermuda Triangle. Students were not allowed to use dictionaries.

Although an in-depth critique of the content of the EIT of English is beyond the scope of this study, it should be noted that the practice tests were more difficult than and did not align with the curriculum of Ukrainian EFL classes. Many questions were ambiguous, even for native speakers, and in several cases, the answer key was incorrect or insufficient.

Although the EIT was developed in order to reduce corruption, reactions have been mixed. In a historical and social overview of the background of the test, Pottroff claimed that the tests, instead of leveling the playing field for all students, “restrict access to positions of power and
privilege” (2009, p. 99). In 2010, after Viktor Yanukovych’s election as president, university entrance exams were reinstated and given equal standing with external independent testing once again (Kyivpost, March 19, 2010).

Research questions and rationale

While most studies of washback occur after the test has been given, teachers may begin to change the way they teach even before the first implementation of a test. However, so far there has been little research on what I am calling “preemptive washback.” Doing fieldwork in Ukraine during and immediately preceding the first iteration of the EIT provided an unique opportunity to view how teachers prepare their students for a test before much information is available concerning it. While practice booklets were available, teachers had neither seen copies of the test or heard reports from students who had taken the EIT in English. However, several teachers claimed that they were changing certain aspects of how they taught in order to prepare their students, even before their students took the EIT, based on what they knew about the test and what they expected to be difficult for their students. This led to my research questions:

1. Are Ukrainian EFL teachers modifying the way that they teach English, based on the fact that their students will be taking the EIT?
2. If so, what types of preemptive washback are occurring in Ukrainian classrooms?
3. What domains of washback are affected before the students actually take the test?

Method

Data collection for this study took place in Ukraine between May and July 2009. Eleven educational personnel, including secondary school teachers, regional methodologists, university professors, school directors, and staff of Peace Corps Ukraine were interviewed; however, this study will focus only on the four participants who discussed the external independent testing of English. Information about the participants can be found in Table 1. They were chosen based on their willingness to participate and their geographic proximity to where I was conducting fieldwork. Two of the participants came from Kharkivska Region in eastern Ukraine, while the other two came from Volynska and L’vivska Regions in western Ukraine. The interviews were composed of 36 semi-structured questions adapted from Hasanova (2007). (The English version of the questions can be found in Appendix A.) Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes to an hour and were audio-recorded using a hand-held digital recorder. Participants were allowed to use English and/or Ukrainian for hearing and responding to questions; all participants in this study chose to use English for both. A subset of the interviews were transcribed completely and analyzed using content analysis for emerging themes, one of which was the external independent testing of English. Based on this initial coding, segments of data pertaining to English testing were selected from all interviews and coded using content analysis (Berg, 2008).

Results

Based on comments made in the interviews, there appeared to be evidence of preemptive washback in two of Spratt’s (2005) domains, curriculum and materials. This is not to say that preemptive washback did or did not occur in regards to teaching methods, feelings and attitudes, or learning, but only that they were not mentioned in the available data.
Table 1
Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oksana Matveyivna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Public Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viktor Stanislavovych</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Public Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sofiya Mykolayivna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Public Secondary School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara Vasylivna</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Regional Methodologist</td>
<td>Recertification Institute</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The preemptive washback in regards to curriculum that teachers mentioned was generally negative. Teachers felt that they had to teach to the test, which covered reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar (Nesvit et. al, 2009), to the detriment of other components of English education. Speaking about how her teaching had changed over time, Sofiya Mykolayivna, a secondary school teacher from western Ukraine, had this to say:

Probably first I did more speaking, I think, but it had a result. Actually I can say like people say, you cannot sit in the same time at the same chairs. Probably it’s true. So if I want to include speaking, I will improve, but about writing, for example. That’s why now I know that I have to divide, think about which activity […] For example this year uh our students they had tests uh only in the reading writing [pause] no no no speaking no listening this year, you know? I think it is important we we developed, but in the 11th form, for example, I had to pay less attention to speaking because they needed more reading.

While she had begun by focusing on speaking, Sofiya Mykolayivna felt that she had to switch her teaching emphasis to reading and writing, because that was what her students would be tested on in the EIT. This inability to “sit [at] the same time [in] the same chairs” is an example of what I am referring to as preemptive washback—the attention that had been paid before to speaking now was given to reading for the 11th form.

Similar issues arose with the teaching of grammar. Two teachers from opposite sides of Ukraine, Sofiya Mykolayivna and Oksana Matveyivna, had almost identical comments about grammar teaching in light of the external independent testing:

I don’t think that grammar is the most important element, but if we have practice […] because you know, these independent tests. (OM)

I understand that [grammar is] probably not the most important fact, but you have to pass some kind of academic exam. (SM)

In both cases the same idea was expressed—teachers claimed that they did not personally consider grammar to be the main skill that students needed to succeed as English learners, but it was necessary for them to succeed as test takers, and therefore the teachers felt that they needed to adapt their curriculum accordingly.

Preemptive washback in materials

Another domain of preemptive washback apparent in the teachers’ comments was that of materials, particularly textbooks. In Ukrainian public schools, the only textbooks which can be used are those on a list recommended by the Ministry of Education (Huszti, 2007). For English, these are divided into two groups—those published in Ukraine and those published in Great Britain. Ukrainian-published textbooks are provided free of charge by the...
Ministry of Education and Science, while British-published textbooks are generally not provided by the schools and must be purchased by parents.

Tamara Vasylivna, a methodologist and teacher trainer at a regional teacher recertification institute, explained that one of the challenges she saw with implementing external independent testing was that the textbooks students used did not prepare them for the test:

The secondary school program doesn’t coincide with the independent testing. Then the test is not valid, because the test should check what they were taught and they were taught with Plakhotnyk books. And when they now say that the level, the results are now, I say to them, so please think what you speak about.

The “Plakhotnyk books” referenced in her comment are a series of Ukrainian-published EFL textbooks by V. M. Plakhotnyk, R. Yu. Martynova, and L. H. Alexandrova. Although they are currently being phased out, they are still commonly used in the upper grades, including the eleventh grade, which was preparing for the external independent testing. Based on the grammar-translation approach to language teaching, the Plakhotnyk books focus on translation, reading, and vocabulary (Huszti, 2007). Even though they, like the tests, do not focus on speaking and listening, they still are dissimilar in content and form from the test, and teachers felt that they did not prepare the students well.

The combination of the upcoming tests and inadequate textbooks led to washback among some teachers. More than one teacher mentioned using additional textbooks to supplement the state-provided books in order to prepare students for the test. In one case, the teacher linked the use of a British-published book directly to the inadequacy of the Plakhotnyk textbooks to prepare the students for the external independent testing:

For senior pupils, there was a book, Oxford Exam Excellence, because you know these independent tests […] We have to prepare our students, but you know Plakhotnyk, you cannot prepare, do anything, using just only Plakhotnyk. (Oksana Matveyivna, secondary school teacher)

However, it did not appear that the country of origin of the textbook was the only factor, or even the greatest factor, in teachers’ decisions to supplement their current curriculum. What was more important was that the books helped prepare the students for testing, whether through tasks that were similar topically to those that the teachers assumed would appear on the test or through practice activities that were structured in the same way as those on the test. One teacher mentioned his use of a Ukrainian-published textbook in exam preparation:

Speak English with Pleasure… is published here in Kharkiv and I would say that I like it. They try to use authentic materials, and there I mean the reading materials, and uh they try to use elements of testing, because that’s important now, we are getting ready now, you know, for the final testing. (Viktor Stanislavovych, secondary school teacher)

While the curriculum washback was primarily negative, the preemptive washback in regards to materials was mixed. On one hand, the disconnect between commonly used textbooks and the EIT leads to the use of supplementary textbooks which the teachers consider to be of higher quality, which can be looked at as a positive development. However, the teachers also described these books, especially the British ones, as being “expensive for parents,” with...
the cost being prohibitive for many families, and, potentially, for the teachers themselves.

**Discussion**

The Ukrainian Ministry of Science and Education has created policies and developed programs that encourage the development of communicative language teaching in Ukrainian EFL classrooms. In 2004, they stated that

Ukraine’s integration into the European and global community makes foreign language an important means of intercultural communication... The main purpose of teaching a foreign language in secondary school is developing communicative competence formed by communicative skills based on language knowledge and use. (Ministry of Education and Science of Ukraine, 2004, p. 3; cited in Smotrova, 2009, p. 728)

However, the washback brought on by the external independent testing of English, which was also created by the Ministry of Education and Science, seems to be taking Ukrainian EFL classrooms in the opposite direction, away from communicative methods and back to a more grammar-oriented approach. None of the sections of the practice test are particularly communicative in nature, and there are no speaking or listening components to the test. Even before the first implementation of the test, teachers were changing the way that they taught to focus less on speaking and more on grammar.

**Conclusion**

Of the five domains of classroom washback identified by Spratt (2005), two, curriculum and materials, were identified as areas of preemptive washback among Ukrainian EFL teachers as they prepared their students for the external independent testing in English. Curriculum washback primarily appeared to be negative, with less attention paid to speaking and listening, skills that teachers had been told would not be covered on the test, and significantly more time devoted to grammar study at the expense of other areas. Materials washback was primarily evident in regards to textbooks and could be regarded as positive, with teachers finding their current textbooks inadequate and supplementing them with other books.

While no evidence of the other three domains of classroom washback—teaching methods, feelings and attitudes, and learning—occurred in this data, they may have occurred as well and simply were not mentioned by the participants. This is particularly true for teaching methods—while it seemed, based on the changes that the teachers were making to their curriculum, that they might be making deliberate changes to their methodology, no teacher specifically stated that he or she was using more or less communicative methods in order to prepare students for the external independent testing.

This is a very small-scale study and cannot be considered representative of Ukrainian EFL teachers as a whole. In addition, because testing was not the original focus of my research, I did not ask all the teachers I interviewed about their experience with external independent testing of English, which would have given a fuller picture. Also, because I did not realize initially that this was going to be a significant issue, I did not ask as many probing follow-up questions to mentions of testing as I did later on in data collection.

Future research on this topic could expand to see if the domains of preemptive washback found prior to the first implementation of the test continued in further iterations. Also, a larger study could be conducted to see if the other domains of
classroom washback appear as the teachers gain a better understanding of what is on the test and how their students have performed on it.

In conclusion, the future of external independent testing in Ukraine is currently unsettled. The 2009 presidential elections saw a close race between Viktor Yanukovych, considered to be a pro-Russia candidate, who was opposed to the system of external independent testing (Yanukovych, 2009), and Yulia Tymoshenko, a pro-Western candidate who states in her party platform that she is in favor of independent testing for prospective university students (Tymoshenko, 2010). With Yanukovych’s victory and subsequent appointment of Dmytro Tabachnyk as the new Minister of Science and Education, testing has been canceled for third, fifth through eighth, and tenth grade students for the 2009-2010 academic year (Kyivpost, March 30, 2010). In addition, university entrance exams have been reintroduced and can be included, along with high school grade point averages, in institutions’ decisions as to whether or not to admit students (Poltavets, 2010). While some have argued that this will return Ukraine’s educational system to the corruption of former days, proponents claim that placing less focus on tests will mean that fewer teachers will “teach to the test” and there will be less negative classroom washback.
References


Preemptive Test Washback in Ukrainian EFL Classrooms

(Unpublished master’s thesis).
Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS.


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APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW GUIDE 3

Background Information

1. What is your educational background?
2. What made you decide to become an English teacher?
3. How long have you been teaching English?
4. What grades [forms] do you usually teach?
5. How many lessons do you teach each week?
6. How many students are in each class?

Textbooks and Curriculum

7. What textbook do you use in class? What do you think about the quality of the textbook?
8. What other materials besides the textbook do you use?
9. Do you use any technical equipment in your classes? If “yes,” what do you use? How do you use it?
10. Do you read the magazine English? Do you use any of the teaching ideas in it? Why or why not? Do you read any other magazines about teaching English as a foreign language?
11. Do you design your class syllabus [calendar plan]? Are you able to make changes to it?

Teaching Methods and Beliefs

12. Can you describe a typical English lesson in your classroom? What are some activities that you often use in class?
13. Where do you get your teaching ideas from?
14. Have your methods for teaching English changed since you first began to teach it? If so, how?
15. Which do you think is more important for your students in learning English—fluency or accuracy? Why?
16. What do you think is the role of translation in EFL classes? Do you have your students translate texts? Why or why not?
17. What is your approach to teaching grammar?
18. How often do you use English in your classes? What do you use it for? How often do your students use English in your classes? What do they use it for?
19. Do you encourage your students to use English outside of class?
Communicative Language Teaching

20. Are you familiar with Communicative Language Teaching? If yes, where did you hear about it?
21. What do you know about Communicative Language Teaching? How would you describe it?
22. What do you see as the advantages of Communicative Language Teaching? The disadvantages?
23. Do you use Communicative Language Teaching methods in your classroom? Why or why not?

Teacher Training

24. How many times have you attended EFL recertification classes since you started teaching?
25. Were any of your recertification classes done by native speakers of English? Where were they from?
26. Do you find those classes useful for your teaching? Have you incorporated any techniques you have learned during training sessions in your classes?

Peace Corps

27. Have you ever had a Peace Corps Volunteer at your school? What can you tell me about that experience?
28. What teaching methods did they use? Did you find them useful?
29. Do you use any of the Peace Corps Volunteer’s teaching methods now? If so, which ones? Why or why not?

Closing Questions

30. What is your greatest challenge as an EFL teacher?
31. What is the best part of being an EFL teacher?
Endnotes

1 Implementation will be completed in the 2012/2013 academic year.
2 For reasons of confidentiality, all participants have been given pseudonyms.
3 Some of these questions were adapted from Hasanova (2007).