

The IELTS Preparation Washback on Learning and Teaching Outcomes

RESULTATS D'APPRENTISSAGE ET D'ENSEIGNEMENT DE LA PREPARATION A L'IELTS WASHBACKS

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Abstract

Due to the important roles that nowadays standardized tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, etc. have on students' lives around the world like Iran, the present study has tried to provide both a clear view toward the washback effect of IELTS preparation courses on learning and teaching outcomes and an obvious path for IELTS teachers in order to modify their methods and their way of teaching if it is necessary. Therefore, the present study has tried to investigate whether IELTS preparation classes have any influence on the learning processes and the achievement of students in such an examination, specifically in the Iranian context, and at the same time to seek whether the construct of such tests makes any difference in the methods used in teaching or not. Accordingly, the researcher benefited from a mixed method approach that is both qualitative and quantitative modes of inquiry. So, fifty five students who took part in the IELTS preparation courses and nine IELTS teachers who involved in this learning and teaching process were selected to be representative of the accessible population. The students were supposed to be given one questionnaire before and one after taking part in IELTS preparation classes to extract their expectations of such classes. But because of the limitation of the study that is the shortage of time, both questionnaires were given to them at the same time. The teachers were also supposed to be interviewed and their ideas about these classes were transcribed and codified. However, because of inaccessibility to the teachers, the researcher had to type the questions and give them to the teachers. Finally, the gathered data were submitted to SPSS Software and the results were analyzed and interpreted. The results indicated a significant difference

between the students' expectations before taking part in the IELTS preparation courses and their expectations after taking part in such courses. In other words, these classes had both positive and little effects not necessarily negative effects on different Iranian students' learning processes and their achievement in such an examination. Although the students' expectations before and after taking the course changed significantly due to their both optimistic and pessimistic views toward some aspects of these courses, it was too difficult to make it clear that in which aspects of the course their expectations changed. Moreover, the construction of such tests affected the teachers' way of teaching processes and made them teach students different techniques and strategies in comparison to other types of tests.

Key words: Washback; IELTS preparation courses; Learning outcomes; Teaching outcomes; Iranian context

Résumé

En raison de l'importance du rôle que les tests de nos jours standardisés tels que l'IELTS, TOEFL, etc avoir sur la vie des étudiants du monde entier comme l'Iran, la présente étude a tenté de fournir à la fois une vision claire vers l'effet en retour des cours de préparation IELTS apprentissage et l'enseignement des résultats et un chemin évident pour les professeurs IELTS afin de modifier leurs méthodes et leur façon d'enseigner si elle est nécessaire. Par conséquent, la présente étude a tenté de déterminer si les cours de préparation IELTS avoir une quelconque influence sur le processus d'apprentissage et le rendement des élèves dans un tel examen, en particulier dans le contexte iranien, et dans le même temps de rechercher si la construction de ces tests rend aucune différence dans les méthodes utilisées dans l'enseignement ou non. En conséquence, le chercheur a bénéficié d'une méthode mixte qui est à la fois qualitatives et quantitatives des modes d'enquête. Ainsi, 55 étudiants qui ont pris part au cours de préparation IELTS IELTS et neuf professeurs qui participent à ce

processus d'apprentissage et d'enseignement ont été sélectionnés pour être représentatifs de la population accessible. Les élèves étaient censés être donnés un questionnaire avant et un après avoir participé à des cours de préparation IELTS pour extraire leurs attentes de ces classes. Mais en raison de la limitation de l'étude qui est le manque de temps, deux questionnaires ont été donnés à la fois. Les enseignants étaient également censés être interrogés et leurs idées sur ces classes ont été transcrites et codifiées. Cependant, en raison de l'inaccessibilité à l'enseignant, le chercheur avait pour taper les questions et les donner à l'enseignant. Enfin, les données recueillies ont été soumises au logiciel SPSS et les résultats ont été analysés et interprétés. Les résultats indiquent une différence significative entre les attentes des étudiants avant de prendre part aux cours de préparation à l'IELTS et de leurs attentes, après avoir participé à ces cours. En d'autres termes, ces classes ont eu des effets positifs et peu pas nécessairement des effets négatifs sur les processus différents étudiants iraniens d'apprentissage et leur réalisation dans un tel examen. Bien que les attentes des étudiants avant et après avoir suivi le cours a changé considérablement en raison de leurs opinions à la fois optimistes et pessimistes envers certains aspects de ces cours, il était trop difficile à établir clairement que dans laquelle les aspects du cours de leurs attentes modifiées. Par ailleurs, la construction de tels tests affectés manière dont les enseignants du processus d'enseignement et les firent enseigner aux élèves les différentes techniques et stratégies en comparaison à d'autres types de tests.

Mots clés: Washback; des cours de préparation d'IELTS; Résultats d'apprentissage; L'enseignement des résultats; Contexte Iranien

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INTRODUCTION

Tests are usually used as a component of teaching processes and are regarded as predictors of the consequences of the classrooms. It is assumed that tests affect teaching and learning. This effect is referred to as washback (backwash). Washback is defined as “the impact of a test on teaching, and...tests can be powerful determiners, both positively and negatively, of what happens in classrooms” (Wall & Alderson, 1993: 41, cited in Cheng, 2005: 6). Cheng et al. (2004: 1) stated “washback and the impact of tests more generally has become a major area of study within educational research, and language testing in particular”. As far as the development in educational setting and especially

in language testing is concerned, researchers have tried to investigate changes which are done through language testing. This notion can be seen in the words of different scholars such as Lord and Cheng (1987, 7, cited in Cheng, 2005: 1): “Rapid change has long been a phenomenon of modern times. And it is a phenomenon that is universal: no one and nowhere have escaped”. Therefore, considerable attention has been paid to the issues related to language testing over recent years. For example, IELTS (international English language testing system), which is an international standardized test of English language proficiency, is used nowadays widely around the world like Iran. Passing this examination has an important role in the lives of the students such as admission to the overseas universities. That is why a lot of students try to get their degree in such tests by attending to such tests preparation classes. Thus, the aim of this study is to investigate whether IELTS preparation classes have any influence on the learning processes and the achievement of students in this examination, specifically in the Iranian context, and at the same time to seek whether the construct of such tests makes any difference in the methods used in teaching or not. A lot of research has been done on the washback effect of testing on teaching and learning especially on the washback effect of standardized tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, and so on. Despite the relatively large number of studies done in washback, little research has been done to investigate whether or not these tests preparation courses have any impact on the students' learning processes and their achievement in this international examination and at the same time the teaching processes as well. The concept of this issue is reported by Lewthwaite (2007: 1): “washback studies are a relatively new phenomenon and, as ever, researchers state that more research is needed in the area”. Accordingly, the researcher considered this issue as a research gap thus bridging this gap by the present research. As a result, an investigation should be done in the Iranian context to find out whether Iranian students benefit from such courses in order to achieve their goals and to see whether the construct of such tests has any influence on the teaching processes or not.

It is worth mentioning that the researcher is aware of the fact that the existence of these classes itself is the result of positive or negative washback effect of such tests. That is, if such tests did not exist, these classes would not exist either. Therefore, as mentioned before, the primary purpose of this study was to investigate the washback of IELTS preparation course on the learning processes and the achievement of students in this examination, specifically in the Iranian context, and at the same time to seek whether the construct of such tests made any difference in the methods used in teaching or not.

In line with the above mentioned purposes the following research questions were put forward:

1. Do IELTS preparation courses have any impacts

on the Iranian students' learning processes and their achievement in this examination? If yes, do they have positive or negative effect? And what are the effects?

2. Does the form of such tests (IELTS in comparison to other types of standardized tests) make any differences in the methods used in teaching? If yes, which aspects of such tests will make any changes in the way of teaching?

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review outlines the relevant issues regarding language testing in general and washback studies in particular. Traditionally, tests were regarded just as tools to measure the ability of the students at the end of the teaching and learning processes or what Cheng (2005) called "evaluative purposes". But in fact, with the developments in the language testing studies, the concept and study of washback has been given an important place in educational setting. Washback (backwash) or the impact of testing on teaching and learning is based on the idea that "tests should drive teaching and hence learning (measurement-driven instruction)" (Cheng, 2005: 26). Therefore, many scholars investigated different aspects of language testing in general and washback studies in particular. The pioneer in researching washback in the area of language testing called Charles Alderson. He talked about the need in research related to washback effect. Alderson (1986: 104, cited in Cheng, 2005: 25) discussed the "potentially powerful influence offsets, and argued for innovations in the language curriculum through innovations in language testing". Researchers at various eras had different ideas and investigated different aspects regarding language testing and the relevant concepts such as washback. For example, "Before 1990s, washback was researched mostly in the field of general education and accounted for through informal observations and generalities" (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng et al., 2004; Wall, 2000, cited in Reynolds, 2010). According to Nguyen, Griffin and Izard (n.d): "in the early 1960s, tests were beginning to be seen as having an effect on teaching apart from the better known roles of measuring students achievement, placement, diagnostics or selection". In fact, the concepts of washback have been changed overtime and especially since the question raised by Alderson and Wall (1993): "Does washback exist?" Moreover, Reynolds (2010) stated that since the 1990s, researchers started investigating the concept of 'washback' or 'impact' of language tests empirically. Hughes (1994) developed a trichotomy model for washback studies: "washback to the participants (teachers, learners, and test/materials developers), processes (course curriculum, classroom material and teachers' methodology) and products (the quality of learners' learning)" (cited in Reynolds, 2010: 10). Bachman and Palmer (1996: 29-30) viewed test impact at two levels: in terms of its micro effects on the individuals in a classroom and its macro effects on

educational systems and societies. Regarding the same issue, another researcher called Manjarres (n.d) stated "there seems to be a number of variables in society, education, and schools that determine how washback will appear" (p.5). For example, different variables such as learners' background, course length and the amount of their exposure to the language outside the class may affect this process (Green, 2007). Besides these issues, some researchers reported different statements about two types of washback; that is, positive and negative washback. For instance, Cheng (2005) stated that the positive or negative effect of washback depended on "what the examination measures". If the examination was relevant to the objectives of the course, the type of washback would be positive otherwise it would be negative. Another researcher reported that washback is of two types, positive and negative depending on the beneficial and harmful influence it has on educational practices (Hughes, 1989, cited in Pan, 2009). Cheng et al. (Eds) (2004), mentioned "washback exists and has consequences, often unintended or negative or positive or both" (cited in a book review, 2007). Bailey (1996) also stated "washback is positive or negative depending on whether or not the test promoted the learners' language development" (cited in Hayes, 2003: 14). However, there are researchers who have opposed ideas regarding this type of division. For example, in the survey Lewthwaite (2007: 3) has done on literature, he came to the conclusion that "there is no automatic relationship between the use of an exam in a programme and washback of either positive or negative variety". In fact, the literature on washback shows that "while there is acknowledgement of the potential for tests to influence teaching and learning, there is no unanimous agreement whether 'washback exists', whether it is positive or negative and how it actually works in practice" (Hayes, 2003: 11).

Nowadays, different high-stake tests are used to measure the linguistic competence of the individuals all over the world. Moreover, as the population of international students increases, the use of international tests such as IELTS to test the students' language ability increases as well. Therefore, this issue has attracted many educators in establishing such test preparation courses and textbooks and the impact of such high-stake testing on teaching and learning has been taken into consideration by different researchers. Regarding this issue, different empirical studies have been done on the washback effects of IELTS tests on both learning and teaching in different contexts. Cheng (2005) believes that washback is an educational phenomenon that has a very complex nature and must be evaluated with regard to "contextual variables of society's goals and values, the educational system in which the test is used, and the potential outcomes of its use" (Bachman and Palmer, 1996: 35). In 1996, he conducted a very comprehensive study to see the impact of a high-stake public examination on classroom

teaching and learning in Hong Kong secondary schools. He observed the washback effect of this examination on different groups of stakeholders, teachers' and students' attitudes and curriculum changes within the local educational setting. The results of this study showed the importance of this public examination in Hong Kong secondary schools which led to the changes in the syllabus but without any changes in the beliefs and attitudes of both teachers and students about how to teach and how to learn. Chen (2006) also investigated the relationship between washback effects and curriculum innovation in language teaching and learning which resulted in negative washback effects found with regard to the lack of agreement between the testing objective and the new curriculum. Therefore, the study suggested washback effects of external tests to be taken into consideration when a new curriculum was introduced. Other researchers have investigated the effect of test preparation courses on both teaching and learning outcomes. For instance, the results of the study done by Rahimi and Nazhand (2010) showed that the IELTS preparation courses had a significant effect on the expectations and perceptions of the learners toward the course outcomes. In fact, these courses included a relatively narrower range of skills than other types of courses which prepared learners for the English proficiency they needed for their different purposes. Moreover, Green (2007) investigated the influences that test preparation courses had on improving the students' IELTS writing score. The findings of the study showed that test-driven instruction did not raise students' scores but in order to improve their score, the material covered on the test was to be integrated with regular teaching. Green (2007) also raised a question whether these test preparation courses prepare students well for academic study. As a result, he tried to investigate the issue by making a comparison between three course types in order to see in which course the students performed better. In the course type 1 that is test preparation course, the learners' focus was on succeeding the IELTS tests. In the second type of the course, which was pre-sessional course in English for academic purposes (EAP), the learners were introduced to the language skills which were necessary to them before starting at the specific university. The third type of the course was the combination of the previous two courses in which the students were prepared for the IELTS tests and at the same time to be able to be accepted at a specific university. The result of the study showed that learners improved their IELTS academic writing scores in all three course types but in course type 3 (combination course) learners showed better results in their scores. Findings also showed that focused test preparation courses had no clear advantage over other courses. A researcher called Green (2007) more or less came to the same conclusions. He tried to answer the question whether IELTS preparation courses help students get higher IELTS scores. At first, he concluded

that IELTS courses caused students get better scores but "the additional benefit is limited" (p. 282). However, the results of the data analysis showed that such courses were not "significant predictors of outcomes; that is, IELTS preparation courses were not significantly better when other conditions were taken into account" (cited in book review, 2010). Finally, this literature review on washback studies shows that various researches have been done in different contexts and under different conditions but in fact little research has been done on the impact of IELTS preparation courses on the students' learning processes and their achievement in this international examination specifically in the Iranian context and the way such tests affect the teaching processes. Therefore, an investigation should be done in the Iranian context to find out whether Iranian students benefit from such courses in order to achieve their goals and to see whether the construct of such tests has any influence on the teaching processes or not. Therefore, this study aims at investigating this issue.

2. METHOD

In this part of the study the researcher has explained first very briefly the data collection methods, the participants, and the instruments which were used. Then, this part has been followed by the data analysis for which the researcher made use of a mixed method approach; that is, both qualitative and quantitative modes of inquiry at the same time. According to Ary et al. (2006: 504), one of the standards of rigor for research in a qualitative study is dependability or trustworthiness which is labeled as reliability in a quantitative study. As they stated dependability is "the extent to which variation can be traced or explained." In order to establish and enhance dependability, the best criterion used in this study was the one suggested by Ary et al. (2006); that is, "documentation". The strategy used for this criterion was "Audit trail". "It documents how the study was conducted, including what was done, when, and why" (Ary et al., 2006: 509). In audit trail or documentation everything is documented clearly for further reference. In order to enhance credibility as another standard of rigor in a qualitative study which is called internal validity in a quantitative study, in this study the researcher made use of a strategy called methods of triangulation. That is she benefited from two methods of data collection such as interview and questionnaire.

2.1 Participants

The participants in the present study were fifty five students who took part in both the IELTS preparation courses which is the direct washback effect of these classes and indirect washback effect of such tests and though the private classes. Other participants were nine IELTS teachers who involved in this learning and teaching process in order to see whether the construct of such tests

made any difference in their way of teaching.

2.2 Instruments

Since these classes are held so that the students who take part in the tests can achieve their goals, it could be said that these classes are the direct washback of the tests. Now, in the present study, the researcher wanted to see whether these classes were effective or not. If yes, what were the effects? As a result, the instruments in this study were both structured interview and a questionnaire. The interview questions were a mixture of both the questions made by the researcher and the questions taken from an M.A. Thesis (Bailey, 2009) (see Appendix B). Another instrument used in this study was a questionnaire taken from an M. A. Thesis (Bailey, 2009) (see Appendix C). This questionnaire was a Likert-type scale ranging from "often" to "never". It consisted of two parts (part A and part B) which were about students' expectations of IELTS courses before and after taking the course. The reliability and validity of the instruments were determined through a pilot study by Bailey (2009).

2.3 Data Collection

To collect data, the researcher went to one of the Iranian language institutes available in which IELTS preparation courses were held, Bahar institute. In order to discover the students' expectations before and after taking part in such courses, it was assumed that one of the questionnaires (part A) distributed among the students at the start of the IELTS preparation courses to see their attitudes and expectations toward these courses and another one (part B) after the completion of the course to see whether such courses were effective or not. But due to the time limitations of the study, the researcher had to distributed both of the questionnaires at the same time with an explanation that one is related to their expectations before and one after taking part in such courses. The researcher had to distribute the other questionnaires among other students who were preparing themselves to take part in that examination through private classes. Moreover, the teachers were also supposed to be interviewed to see whether the format of such tests makes any difference in their teaching process or not. But again because the accessible teachers did not have enough time to be interviewed, the researcher had to type the questions and give them to the teachers.

2.4 Data Analysis

In the present study, the obtained data were analyzed and interpreted in different phases. That is, the quantitative data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed through SPSS Software. For this reason, a paired sample T-test was run for the purpose of comparing the participants' expectations before and after taking the course. Finally, in order to analyze the qualitative data obtained from the interview and the open ended questions at the end of the second questionnaire, the obtained data

were codified and then interpreted.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary aim of the present study was to investigate washback of IELTS preparation courses within the context of Iran. The study started by surveying the related literature on washback studies that various researches have done in different contexts and under different conditions. With this issue in mind, in what follows the results of the study for each research question were presented and discussed one by one.

Research Question 1: Do IELTS preparation courses have any impacts on the Iranian students' learning processes and their achievement in this examination? If yes, do they have positive or negative effect? And what are the effects?

To answer this question the researcher made use of both qualitative and quantitative modes of inquiry. That is, the researcher put some open ended questions at the end of the questionnaire distributed among the students from the qualitative point of view. Accordingly, the researcher codified the obtained data. Moreover, for the quantitative mode, the researcher made use of two questionnaires (before and after taking the course) to see if there was any difference between the students' expectations before and after taking the courses. Having gathered the data, the researcher submitted the data to SPSS Software and after running a paired sample t-test, analyzed and interpreted the data in the following way:

Based on the results obtained from the table of paired sample t-test (Table 2), the significant value obtained was .000. Therefore, as Table 2 shows (see Appendix A), the researcher concluded that there was a significant difference between the students' expectations before taking part in the IELTS preparation courses and their expectations after taking part in such courses ($t=4.953$ $p<0.05$). So, it means that the IELTS preparation courses had a significant effect on the expectations of the students toward the course outcomes. The results of the study done by Rahimi and Nazhand (2010) also showed the same conclusions. In fact, in their study, these courses included a relatively narrower range of skills than other types of courses which prepared learners for the English proficiency they needed for their different purposes. By comparing the mean of the students' obtained scores according to the table of descriptive statistics (Table 3) (see Appendix A), the researcher also reached more or less to the same point. In fact, the mean scores of the students before taking the course ($x= 22.6909$) was more than those of the students after taking such courses ($x=19.5273$). In other words, most of the students before taking the course had more or less the same expectations and were more optimistic toward these courses but after taking such courses, they changed their ideas. Regarding what the tables (Table 2 and Table 3) reported and what the results

showed, the answer to the research question one is “yes”. IELTS preparation courses had positive impacts on the Iranian students’ learning processes and their achievement in this examination. However, this conclusion is not absolute since according to the Table 4 (see Appendix A), the frequency of the students’ expectations (their answers to different questions) before and after taking the IELTS course showed unrealistic results. That is, the results showed that both before and after the courses, the students were both optimistic and pessimistic toward some aspects of these courses. For example, in the case of question number one, i.e. students’ expectations to get a high score, all the participants answered exactly the same both before and after taking the course (yes=41). In the case of question number two, i.e. students’ expectations to organize their time for studying, their expectations have increased in comparison to their expectations before taking the course (yes=38). Since the explanation of each question one by one was too time consuming, the researcher put the results of the frequency of the other questions in a separate table (Table 4.1.) (see Appendix A) for further reference if needed. Accordingly, the findings of the tables showed that the IELTS preparation courses had no clear advantage for the students taking part in them. That is, it was difficult to make a clear conclusion that which aspects of the courses made dramatic changes in the learners’ expectations toward these courses. A researcher called Green (2007) more or less came to the same conclusions. He tried to answer the question whether IELTS preparation courses help students get higher IELTS scores. At first, he concluded that IELTS courses caused students get better scores but “the additional benefit is limited” (p. 282). However, the results of the data analysis showed that such courses were not “significant predictors of outcomes; that is, IELTS preparation courses were not significantly better when other conditions were taken into account” (cited in book review, 2010).

3.1 Codification of the Data:

While codifying the obtained data from the open ended questions at the end of the questionnaire, the researcher noticed that several points were repeatedly mentioned by the participants about different questions raised. In the following, the participants’ statements were put forward after each question.

3.1.1 Question1. What are Your Most Important Reasons for Taking the IELTS Preparation Course?

But few of them mentioned the following answers:

Others rarely uttered other reasons such as
To find out how to answer IELTS questions;
To get a high score in IELTS;

But few of them mentioned the following answers:

To improve general level of English;
To improve chances of work;

Others rarely uttered other reasons such as
To immigrate

To continue their education in another country

As, Bachman and Palmer (1996: 29-30) viewed test impact at two levels: in terms of its micro effects on the individuals in a classroom and its macro effects on educational systems and societies, these responses showed that students had various motives taking part in such courses and thus these courses might have different effects on the individuals.

3.1.2 Question2. Do IELTS Preparation Courses Have Any Impacts on Your Learning Processes and As a Result on Your Achievement in This Examination? If Yes, What are the Effects or How Well These Courses Make You Ready to Take Part Successfully in Such an Examination? If No, Why?

Nearly every one answered positively to this question. They stated that:

“It helped me become familiar with useful strategies and as a result get better score.”

“It prepared me to organize my knowledge and become less stressful.”

“I learned how to do the tasks in the exam.”

“I improved my four skills in a more academic style.”

“It helped me put into practice my previous linguistic knowledge of English in a more systematic way.”

“It made me familiar with different books necessary to improve my general English.”

“It encourages me to continue learning English.”

“It helped me how to manage my time.”

“It helped me recall most of the forgotten vocabularies and grammar.”

“I learned how to deal with different tasks precisely and doing them with more self-confidence.”

“The simulation exams made me ready for the real one.”

These findings can be supported through Bailey’s (1996) word. He stated “washback is positive or negative depending on whether or not the test promoted the learners’ language development” (cited in Hayes, 2003: 14). Consequently, the results of this part of the study have shown that IELTS preparation courses had mostly positive impacts on the students’ learning processes and as a result on their achievement in such an international examination. The minority of the participants also answered negatively and unfortunately they did not put any comments about why they had such a belief. Although a few mentioned that these courses had no impact on their learning processes and their achievement, none of them expressed exactly negative impact of such courses. In other words, the literature on washback showed that “while there is acknowledgement of the potential for tests to influence teaching and learning, there is no unanimous agreement whether ‘washback exists,’ whether it is positive or negative and how it actually works in practice” (Hayes, 2003: 11).

3.1.3 Question3. Overall, Having Completed the IELTS Course, Were Your Expectations Met/ Was the Course What You Expected/ did You Learn What You Wanted to Learn? If Yes, How? If No, Why?

The majority of the participants stated that their

expectations were met through these courses. Their repeatedly mentioned statements were put forward:

“It helped me how to deal with standardized exams.”

“Yes, with practice and repetition.”

“Yes, it satisfied my needs as the instructor combined his own experiences with the teaching.”

“Yes, it made me put into practice my four skills.”

“I wanted to improve my speaking skill and knowledge of my vocabularies and I think my needs were answered.”

“Yes, it helped me budget my time and how to tackle different skills.”

Some of them mentioned that their expectations were not met completely. On the other hand, they did not learn what they expected to learn unless in some aspects of the task. Such findings were shown in the literature that test preparation courses had no clear advantage over other courses. As mentioned before, another researcher called Green (2007) came to the same conclusions too. In following some of the students' related statements were presented:

“No, I expected to learn more but at the end of the course, I found that these courses did not have much impact on improving my English. In fact, all depend on my own attempt rather than attending to such courses.”

“Not exactly, I expected these classes to be more useful focusing enough on different skills but it did not.”

“No, because I think the way they teach and practice with us is not good enough. They should practice more seriously and also they should lengthen the time of the courses.”

Research Question 2: Does the form of such tests (IELTS in comparison to other types of standardized tests) make any differences in the methods used in teaching? If yes, which aspects of such tests will make any changes in the way of teaching?

To answer this question the researcher made use of only a qualitative mode of inquiry. That is, the teachers were supposed to be interviewed so that their ideas about IELTS preparation courses were gathered. But because of inaccessibility to IELTS teachers, the researcher had to type the structured questions and provide them with a copy of them. Having obtained the data, the researcher codified them based on the provided responses for each question and divided them into different categories. The codified results were shown in Table 1 (see Appendix A). Accordingly, the obtained data from the teachers' interview suggested that such tests affected the way of their teaching processes as well. That is, a great amount of time in the course was allocated to making students familiar with the form of the exam since the strategies the students must learn would depend on the type of questions. Therefore, the techniques the students practiced in other courses such as TOEFL were different from those they practiced in IELTS preparation courses. To support this statement, the following is an example provided by one of the teachers:

“In the TOEFL exam, students must practice taking notes. The reason is that the listening sections in the exam are played before

the students see the questions. The students are required to take notes and then use their notes to answer the questions which they see when the recording ends. However, in IELTS preparation courses, students must practice reading the questions, underlying keywords and guess the right answer. They must also practice dictation and spelling. The reason is that students are given some time to read the questions and they are expected to write the answers as they listen to the recording in the listening section of the IELTS exam. So, spelling errors are important in the IELTS while in the TOEFL exam listening section, all the questions are multiple-choice and spelling does not matter.”

CONCLUSION

Due to the important place that washback has in educational setting, and also due to the significant roles that standardize tests such as IELTS have on the students' lives, the present study has tried to provide a clear view toward the washback effect of IELTS preparation courses on learning and teaching outcomes or in other words on the students' success in passing that examination specially in the context of Iran. Actually, the researcher more or less followed Hughes's (1994) trichotomy model for washback studies; that is, “washback to the participants” (in this study, teachers and learners), “washback to the processes” (in this study, teachers' methodology) and “washback to the products” (in this study, the quality of learners' learning)” (cited in Reynolds, 2010: 10). Accordingly, the answer to the research question one is “yes”. IELTS preparation courses had positive impacts on the Iranian students' learning processes and their achievement in this examination. However, this conclusion is not absolute since according to the frequency of the students' expectations (their answers to different questions) before and after taking the IELTS course showed unrealistic results. That is, the results showed that both before and after the courses, the students were both optimistic and pessimistic toward some aspects of these courses. Thus, the findings showed that the IELTS preparation courses had no clear advantage for the students taking part in them. That is, it was difficult to make a clear conclusion that which aspects of the courses made dramatic changes in the learners' expectations toward these courses. Regarding the second research question, the results showed that such tests affected the way of teachers' teaching processes as well. That is, a great amount of time in the course was allocated to making students familiar with the form of the exam since the strategies the students must learn would depend on the type of questions. Therefore, the techniques the students practiced in other courses such as TOEFL were different from those they practiced in IELTS preparation courses. In addition, the findings of the present study are significant in a way that they can be applicable to both IELTS students and teachers. In fact, they help learners to make a better decision while they want to take part in such courses. They are also vital for IELTS teachers in order to modify their methods and their way of teaching if

it is necessary. The findings of this study provide a useful path for those researchers interested in washback studies as well. Finally, the results of the present study cannot be generalized to other contexts since in different contexts and under different conditions, the results might be different. This statement can be supported and understood better in the study done by Chen (2006) who investigated the relationship between washback effects and curriculum innovation in language teaching and learning and resulted in negative washback effects found with regard to the lack of agreement between the testing objective and the new curriculum. So, the researcher suggested another replication of this study so that the importance of washback studies specifically regarding standardizes tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, and so on increases.

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Appendix A

Table 1
Results Obtained from the Interview

Theme	Categories	Teachers' answers
IELTS preparation courses	Advantages	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students get familiar with the format of the test 2. Students enhance their different skills 3. Teach them techniques and strategies 4. Students are motivated to spend more time studying and improving their language proficiency 5. Students learn how to study 6. Students learn how to organize their learning processes 7. It helps them to be less stressful during the exam 8. These courses are the most reliable ways to achieve the required mastery 9. It teaches them to practice budgeting their time
	Impacts on the students' learning processes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Not a huge impact due to the lack of having qualified instructors 2. Getting familiar with the way that they have to approach to certain tasks 3. The instructors help students find the quickest way of preparing themselves for the exam 4. Students find their drawbacks in special areas and try to improve them 5. Students know how to organize their time and energy 6. They learn how to develop their learning strategies 7. Equip students with useful strategies to take the test and continue their studies 8. They learn how to answer questions through different clues 9. They correct their errors and their common mistakes 10. Improvement can be seen depending on the students' perseverance 11. Not that much improvement since the learners are more involved in the techniques than real learning of the language 12. It depends on the objectives and specific syllabus of any specific IELTS courses while some courses specifically aim at improving students' general English knowledge, others aim at teaching IELTS tackling skills specifically
	The most important reasons for taking part	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Most of the times they do not know how or when to start 2. They do not know how the exam is 3. They need an experienced instructor to evaluate them and make them ready 4. To improve their skills and be accepted in the exam 5. To gain 'test-wiseness' and get a high score 6. For the sake of preparation 7. Become familiar with the actual exam 8. Shake away their probable stress 9. For immigration or overseas academic studies 10. To improve their general English knowledge
	Teaching materials	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. They are out of date, old and not reliable 2. Most of them follow the old procedures which could not be sufficient 3. I try to use the materials that have been designed and prepared by the same people who have designed and prepared the exam itself, namely Cambridge University professors. So, the materials are useful and guide the students to the right path 4. Materials are chosen based on the last IELTS administration and their authenticity has been confirmed through many experiments 5. Using computer technology with its multimedia facilities help them improve their abilities in most language skills and subskills 6. Materials are chosen based on the previous tests; so, they are to some extent useful but they should be improved 7. There should be a balance between materials that is the books and pamphlets allocated for pre- IELTS and IELTS classes sound to be a kind of outlandish. As the pre- IELTS materials are actually more difficult and comprehensive than those of IELTS classes 8. Using a range of updated learning materials 9. The books and the mock exams contain authentic materials 10. The materials have been written specifically for IELTS candidates
	Difference in the methods due to the difference in the form	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. All of the aspects of the test make the difference since the strategies the students must learn depend on the type of questions 2. Approximately all parts of the preparation class are based on the type of tests that learners are supposed to take; so, all the class time spent with regard to the testing procedure 3. Not that much difference since the form is not so important as the content 4. Not that much difference since the students are thought necessary strategies 5. In speaking, students are asked to give a complete answer and in reading less emphasis is put on comprehension

Table 2
Paired Samples Test

		Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pair 1	before - after	3.16364	4.73663	4.953	54	.000

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	before	22.6909	55	4.34985	.58653
	after	19.5273	55	3.50584	.47273

Table 4
Frequency of the Students' Expectations of IELTS Course

Students' Expectations of IELTS Course	Yes		No	
	Before	After	Before	After
Getting a high score	41	41	14	14
Organizing time to study	33	38	22	17

Table 4.1
Frequency of the Students' Expectations of IELTS Course

Students' Expectations of IELTS Course	Often		Sometimes		Not often		Never	
	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
Doing similar activities	32	24	18	27	2	4	3	0
Taking IELTS practice tests	24	21	25	23	6	11	0	0
Learning general voc.	29	16	18	23	7	16	1	0
Learning grammar	16	9	23	17	14	24	2	5
Learning listening	39	33	12	16	3	6	1	0
Watch TV programmes	3	0	13	4	25	11	14	40
Listening to radio	8	6	15	9	19	11	13	29
Practicing conversation	35	19	16	28	3	8	1	0
Practicing discussion	16	11	29	30	6	14	4	0

Appendix B

Dear instructor please answer the following questions:

1. What do you think of the advantages of holding IELTS preparation courses?
 2. Do you think that IELTS preparation courses have any impacts on the students' learning processes and as a result on their achievement in such an examination? If yes, what are the effects or how well these courses make them ready to take part successfully in such an examination? If no, why?
 3. What do you think of the most important reasons that students take the IELTS preparation courses?
 4. Do you think that the teaching materials you use in your classes are materials which prepare students for the IELTS test? Why (not)?
 5. Does the form of such tests make any difference in the methods you use to teach? If yes, which aspects of the test make the difference? If no, why?
- Thank you for taking part in my study

Appendix (C)

PART A: Expectations of the IELTS course.

Please complete the following statements.

1. I think the IELTS test is (please circle 1 number):

0 _____ 1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5 _____
Very easy very difficult

2. In an IELTS preparation course, I think these language skills are
(please put a number in each box; MOST IMPORTANT-1; not important at all-4):

Listening Reading Speaking Writing

3. After taking the IELTS course, I expect to get a high score when I take the IELTS test:
Yes No

If yes, what score do you expect? _____

4. I expect the IELTS course to help me to learn how to organize my time for studying:
Yes No

5. I expect the activities & tasks we do in class to be similar to the tasks in IELTS (please put an X on the line):

often sometimes not often never

6. I expect to take IELTS practice tests in class (please put an X on the line):

often sometimes not often never

7. On the course I expect to learn general vocabulary (please put an X on the line):

often sometimes not often never

8. On the course I expect to learn grammar (please put an X on the line):

often sometimes not often never

9. On the course I expect to learn how to improve my general listening skills
(please put an X on the line):

often sometimes not often never

10. On the course I expect to learn about the kinds of listening tasks in the IELTS test (please put an X on the line):

often sometimes not often never

11. I expect to watch TV programmes in class (please put an X on the line):

often sometimes not often never

12. I expect to listen to English language radio programmes in class (please put an X on the line):
- _____

15. Any other comments about the course?

Please answer the following questions:

1. What are your most important reasons for taking the IELTS preparation course? (you can choose more than one answer or add your own reasons)

- To learn about the structure of the test
- To improve general level of English
- To find out how to answer IELTS questions
- To get a high score in IELTS
- To improve chances of work
- Other reasons (please explain)

2. Do IELTS preparation courses have any impacts on your learning processes and as a result on your achievement in this examination? If yes, what are the effects or how well these courses make you ready to take part successfully in such an examination? If no, why?

3. Overall, having completed the IELTS course, were your expectations met/ was the course what you expected/ did you learn what you wanted to learn? If yes, how? If no, why?