

Washback Effect of Ethiopian University English Entrance Examination on Practicing and Motivation toward Genres of Writing Skill in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract

Ethiopian University English Entrance Examination is a language testing that measures learners' performance of the language skills to select those who could qualify to the next level of education, i.e., university. The contents appeared in the examination can affect the teaching and learning practice either positively or negatively. This study, therefore, is to assess the washback effect of Ethiopian University National English Language Entrance Examination toward genres of writing skill using descriptive survey design. Four teachers and ten students were selected from grade 12 using availability and simple random sampling technique respectively. The data that are collected through document analysis, interview and classroom observation were analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. The findings of the study revealed the examinations influenced the teaching learning of writing to be aligned with the exam. The teachers taught genres of writing skills according to the contents of the exam instead of teaching them in line with the objectives established in the syllabus. Learning the genres of writing skills based on past entrance exam sheets motivated the students to attend the writing classes effectively. They were motivated to attend the writing classes when the teachers lectured based on the types of questions which appear in the national examination. This entails that students' and teachers' practice and motivation towards genres of writing skill were negatively affected by the type of questions that appeared in the tests.

Keywords: *washback, entrance examination, writing skill, syllabus, contents*

Introduction

English language has been used as a medium of instruction in teaching and learning since modern education was introduced to Ethiopia. It has been the medium of instruction at high schools, colleges and universities across Ethiopia. In connection to this, Ethiopian educational curriculum makes English language a medium of instruction at all levels (MoE, 2002; Melkamu, 2007).

The results gained from the examination can positively or negatively affect the teaching and learning practice and motivation of teachers and students in the classroom. Each year, the Ministry of Education facilitates and develops curriculum and syllabus materials. This helps promote sustainable, equitable and accessible education for all (Simachew, 2012). As Muhamad (2014) also stated, the curriculum comprised English language courses as common subject areas to test and assess learners' language skills. The courses contain productive and receptive skills. Among these skills, writing has been given a great emphasis in the curriculum.

The Ministry of Education employs University Entrance Examination for grade 12 students as one major criterion for university admission. Since 2003, a high stake test has been used as a roadmap to join higher learning institutions. Each year, a test is administered by the National Educational Assessment and Examination Agency (MoE, 2002).

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According to Khan (2013), tests have negative or positive influence on educational process in various ways. In other words, teachers will be influenced by certain tests and will adapt their methodology and lesson content to reflect the test's demands. Hence, tests play an important role not only in the life of learners but also in practices and jobs of teachers and educators. The reason is examinations are still the major tool of assessment in schools, employment and career development. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness that testing can have consequences beyond classroom teaching. Of course, any test has its own influence on teaching and learning process.

Simachew (2012) stated that Ethiopian University Entrance Examination is one of the instruments used to identify students' knowledge and criterion for university admission. So as to cultivate students' English language skills, the curriculum contains four major skills. Writing as a productive skill has a place in the syllabus. Exam items prepared from writing skill enables teachers to teach, students to learn from the textbook. Thus, the national exam affects teachers' language teaching. Simachew added that learners appreciate teachers who teach writing skill contents which are related to the examination which made teachers think that spending much time on non-exam contents is boring.

As Hughes (1994) stated, washback directly or indirectly embraces participants, processes and products. Participants in wash back concept include teachers, students, parents, curriculum designers, policy makers, material developers and administrators. Processes in washback concept includes, for teachers it means: how they teach, what they teach, why they teach, the intensity of their teaching and whether they give extra classes or not. And for student, it refers to what they learn, how they learn, how they practice the language skills, and what to study.

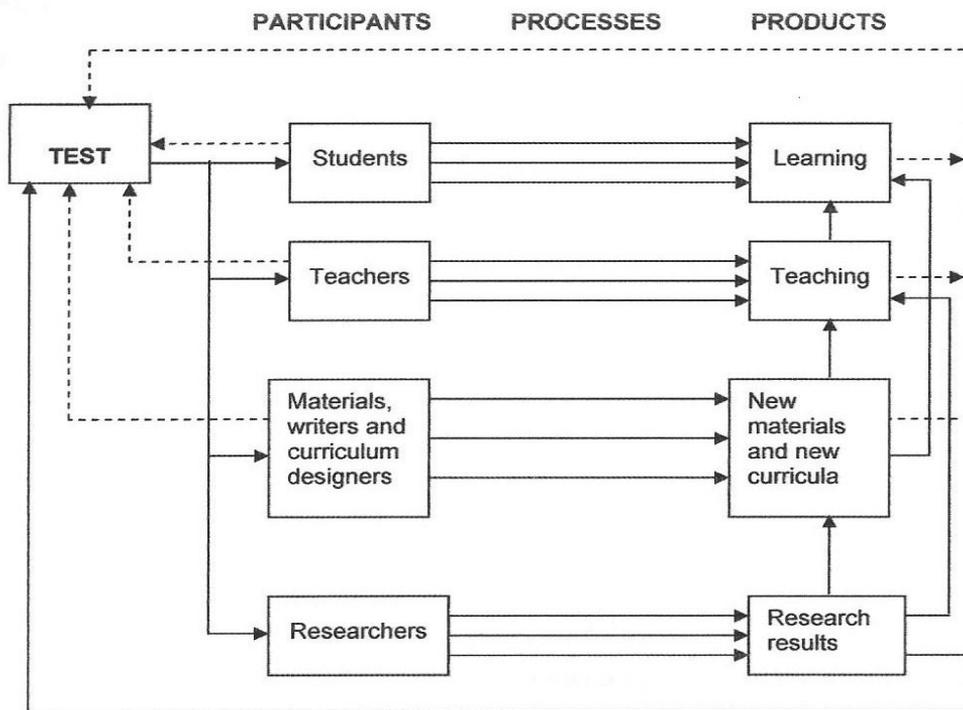


Fig: The relationship among the washback elements (Bailey, 1996:264)

The above model indicates that students learn and take a test, and then the test result affects their learning. Teachers are mainly affected by tests in the sense that their teaching approach is affected by the tests prepared by MoE. Tests affect teaching and learning. Writers and curriculum designers produce new materials and curricula which support and affect teaching and testing. Finally, researchers in education system conduct research to assist teaching and testing. As a whole, test affects students, teachers, material writers and researchers.

Statement of the Problem

In the newly revised English for Ethiopia Textbook (2003) which is prepared based on communicative approach, the genres of writing skill, such as argumentation, narration, description, exposition, etc. has been given due emphasis. As Tsigeri (2007) stated, teaching English based on communicative approach is the most recognized one. Yasin (2014) added the teaching of English language through communicative teaching approach and designing appropriate training for teachers on how to implement in the classroom is crucial. However, according to Abeya (2015), teachers neither encourage students to be involved in writing tasks and activities nor do they teach writing approaches because of the washback effect a test has on practicing the skill.

Currently, the ongoing Ethiopian educational curriculum equally incorporates English language skills equally. However, the communicative value of the genres of writing skill is not getting the desired weight in the national exams for it is developed objective types of items instead of meeting the prior interest of the syllabus. Thus, the main reason for conducting a research about effect of the national exams on genres of writing skill was that there has been a mismatch between the distribution of genres of writing skill in the syllabus and the items of the national exams which, in turn, makes teachers unfocused on the objectives of the syllabus. This forces teachers to stick to the items that appeared in the exams. Hughes (1989) noted that if writing contents taught in classroom do not appear in the test, there will be negative washback effect. This makes students and teachers unfocused on all the genres of writing activities presented for classroom purposes. Teaching and testing are closely related terms in education. Likewise, the researchers' experiences indicated that Ethiopian University Entrance Examination (English) affects the practice of teachers towards genres of writing skill negatively. In the exam, among the writing skills, items which appeared in the past included spelling, punctuation, word order, paragraph coherence and only identifying types of essay. Although teachers tried to incorporate all writing skills including essay in their classes, students often attend teachers who teach writing lessons related to the national examination. Thus, teachers ignore paragraph and essay type skills in EFL classes.

There are related local researches conducted in the area. For instance, Simachew (2012) conducted a research on the influence of the University Entrance English Exam on teachers' and students' practices. Specifically, it aimed at assessing the influence of the exam on the domains of teaching and learning language. It further explored mediating factors of washback effect on teachers' and students' practices such as attitude and other external factors. The findings of the study revealed that the university entrance exams affected the domains of teaching and learning to be exam-oriented. Teachers' perceived awareness of the exam, students' learning attitudes, external pressures in teaching, and their teaching experience mediated washback effect on their practices. Yasin (2014) also made a research on the washback effect of Ethiopian General Secondary Education Certificate Examination on teachers' teaching practices. It was found out that the exams have a

harmful influence over teachers' teaching practices. Ayele (2014) and Sisay (2014) also conducted similar researches on washback effect of the Ethiopian University Entrance Examination on teachers' and students' attitude and behaviors toward teaching and learning English. The findings indicated that the exams have negative washback effect on teachers' and students' practices.

Therefore, the current study is different from the above researches in many ways. Writings are complex intellectual tasks involving many elements, such as planning a writing strategy, communicating ideas clearly and concisely, constructing a reasoned, demonstrable argument, effectively marshaling evidences and using sources appropriately, organizing ideas effectively and employing analytical skills and writing mechanics: grammar, sentence structure and spelling. These genres are commonly assigned (and a bit of creativity) form of writing that every student will encounter while in academia which requires previous planning and practice. In other words, they are common learning contents the students would face in their first year university writing classes. Therefore, it is appropriate for the teachers and students to become capable of and comfortable with this type of writing early in grade 11 and 12. Otherwise, the lessons is challenging on the part of the students. Thus, they require extensive empirical research to reveal how much they are treated in the teaching learning process.

As researchers' experiences in their university careers indicated, most of the students did not have expected level writing, nor were they doing the types of writing that we require of them in their university years. This problem emerges from lack of practicing the skills in the previous grade levels.

Most of the local researches mentioned above have not touched on the practice of the genres of writing skills in relation to washback effect, and students' motivation towards learning writing genres. Instead, first, they focused on the general secondary school examinations. However, the scope of the present research is on the university entrance examinations. Second, the local researches assessed the washback effect on teaching English subject as a whole. They also focused on some mediating variables (which are not in fact touched by the present research) such as, attitude, behavior and motivation. Whereas, the current research is similar with Simachew's research in that both of them were conducted on Ethiopian university entrance examinations. However, Yasin (2104), Ayele (2014) and Sisay (2014) are different in that the present research focused on analyzing the genres of writing skills. These are narration, description, exposition, argumentation, letter writing, spelling, punctuation and research report writing. Comparisons and contrasts were made to see whether these skills appeared both in the syllabi and national exams. To the best of our efforts, we could not find a research that focused on washback effect from these writing skill components. Therefore, the researchers found the issue worthwhile and hence conducted a study which aimed at assessing the washback effect of Ethiopian University English Entrance Examination on teaching and learning the writing skill (analyzing writing skill genres) in EFL classes.

Methods of the Study

The research aimed at making content analysis of the genres of writing skill which appeared in Ethiopian University Entrance Examination and the new English syllabi for grade 11 and 12. To achieve the stated objective, descriptive survey design was employed. The rationale behind using this design was to collect multiple data at a specific time. This is useful to further clarify the current situation and put standards against the current phenomenon that usually appeared in a particular phenomenon (Creswell (2012)). The

data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The quantitative data were described using various numerical values in a tabular form. Following this, qualitative data were thematically categorized and analyzed.

Four English language teachers who have taught grade 12 at Molale Preparatory School in 2018, located in Amhara Region, North Shoa Zone, were chosen. The four English language teachers were selected using availability sampling technique. The researchers also sampled 10 students from grade 12 using simple random sampling technique, lottery method in particular.

Data Collection Instruments

Document Analysis

In order to explore the washback effect of Ethiopian University Entrance Examination of English on genres writing skills, documents analysis was employed. To see whether or not the contents and test formats of the national exams matched with the contents and formats prescribed in the syllabus, the national exams and the textbooks were analyzed. In other words, to check that the contents and formats of the writing skills in the national examinations are aligned with the expected genres of the writing skill, the syllabi were used as a reference. The common genres of the skill are argumentative, descriptive, narrative and expository. In the analysis, the other components such as, punctuation, report writing, letter writing and spelling were considered. This helped to make comparison and contrast among the components of writing skill. Accordingly, the previous four years (2014-2017) Ethiopian University Entrance Examination (English) papers and grade 11 and 12 Newly Revised English Syllabi were taken for the document analysis. Since writing skill items come repeatedly in the high-stake tests, the researchers found the numbers of exam papers adequate for the data collection. In the analysis, the writing skill components appeared in the syllabus was counted chapter by chapter. The types of writing activities and the genres of writing skills-whether free writing or controlled, were identified. In the same way, the contents of the four years national exams were analyzed. Then, comparisons and contrasts were made between the writing skill contents appeared in the national exam and the syllabi. The data were analyzed quantitatively (See the analysis in table 1 below).

Interview

Two sets of semi-structured interview guide were prepared, one for the students and the other for the teachers. The purpose of the interview guide was to understand teachers' opinion about the influence of the national entrance English examination on practicing writing skill in the classroom. The other interview guide was aimed at eliciting data from students concerning the washback effect of the national exam on practicing writing genres and students' motivation towards learning the genres in EFL classroom. The interview guides specifically focused on identifying and analyzing the genres of writing skill appeared in the syllabi and the national exams. It also attempted to see if the teachers and the students would think that the entrance exam question contents and writing activities in the syllabi were the same. In the interview guide, the teachers were asked to state which of the writing skill genres they focused on in the classes. The interview guide also emphasized whether or not the teachers used past exam sheets to prepare questions for students by ignoring the activities in the textbooks. The interview guide was used to check if the teachers paid less attention for the objectives stated in the syllabi and relied on exam papers. The interview guide was also used to see which genres of writing activ-

ities the teachers thought their students would give more attention. Their replies during interview were recorded. Since the number of teachers and the students were optimum, the researchers included all of them to elicit relevant data.

Classroom Observation

Classroom observation was used to explore the practices of genres of writing skill by the teachers and students in the classroom. Using semi-structured checklist, classroom teaching activities, students' motivation for participation, contents and formats teachers used in teaching the writing skill, and students' preference to learn the writing skill were observed. The data gathered through interview and classroom observation were analyzed qualitatively.

Results and Discussions

Content Analysis of Ethiopian University Entrance Examinations, English (2014-2017) and the New English Syllabi for Grades 11 and 12

Writing skill	Number of Questions in Each Examination year					Writing skill in the Syllabi		
						Contents	Grade 11	Grade 12
	2014	2015	2016	2017	Mean		Mean	Mean
Identifying Narration	21	16	20	3	14.95	Narrative Essay Writing	3.2	7.14
Identifying Description	11	11	-	2	5.75	Descriptive Essay Writing	20.3	17.86
Identifying Exposition	11	5	-	-	3.95	Expository Essay Writing	15.45	35.7
Identifying Argumentation	16	-	-	-	3.95	Argumentative Essay Writing	19	14.28
Letter Writing	21	16	27	1	16.13	Letter Writing	22.34	17.86
Spelling	11	16	20	-	11.58	Spelling	---	----
Punctuation	11	26	33	4	18.53	Punctuation	5.2	3.57
Research Report Writing	-	11	-	2	3.13	Research Report Writing	12	3.57
Grand Mean					9.75	Grand Mean	12.19	16.99

The table shows that the types of writing skill items that received more attention in Ethiopian University Entrance Examination were punctuation marks including, hyphen, colon, semi-colon, brackets, quotation marks, commas, question marks and full stops (mean=18.53) with the grand mean of 9.75. Identifying narration among the given five alternatives at sentence level (mean=14.95); and spelling and letter writing (mean=11.58 and 16.13 respectively) are almost moderately treated in the exams. However, the other aspects of writing skill such as identifying types of essays among the given sentences, i.e., description, exposition and argumentation received little attention (mean=5.75, 3.95 and 3.95 respectively).

The new textbooks for grades 11 and 12 have twelve chapters each including contents related to writing genres. Based on the data set in the above table, letter writing genres in grade 11 and grade 12 syllabi accounted ($m=22.34$) and ($m=17.86$) respectively. Descriptive essay writing ($m=20.3$ and 17.86) in grade 11 and 12 syllabi respectively; expository

essay writing ($m=15.45$ and 35.7) in grade 11 and 12 respectively; and argumentation ($m=19$ in grade 11 and $m=14.28$ in grade 12). The grand mean was found to be 12.19 for grade 11 and 16.99 for grade 12. This shows that description, exposition and argumentation get more coverage in the textbooks. However, the remaining writing skill activities, such as narrative essay, spelling, punctuation and research report writing received little weight. According to Bailey (1999), some skills are easier to test than others and these skills may come to be better represented on tests than other skills. For the skills analyzed in the EUEEE, all writing skills were not included equally though their intensity in concept and nature of content are important in a syllabus. To meet the demands of the national exam, classroom teachers teach contents out of the textbook. Thus, teachers experience the negative effect of national examination on their teaching writing skill in the classroom.

The document analysis, therefore, shows that all the writing skill activities are considered equally important in the syllabi, but they were not prepared in the previous national exams based on the objectives stated in the syllabi. Although paragraph and essay writing activities are included in different chapters of the textbook, the items prepared in the national exams are objective types which may cause students to think only at sentence level. Students are made to choose the correct answers among the given four alternatives. According to Bailey (1999) and Davidson (2007), tests make teachers narrow the curriculum and lose instructional time (teaching practice) leading to teach the test. The mismatch between contents of the tests and contents covered in a syllabus bring anxiety both to teachers and students and lead them to teach and learn by ignoring the necessary writing skill to cope with the test. This leads to negative washback effect and decrease students' interest and motivation to learn the writing genres.

Washback Effect of Ethiopian University Entrance Examination of English on Students' Motivation towards Genres of Writing Skill

Analysis of the data obtained from the teachers indicated that the genres of writing activities appeared in the new national syllabi were to a greater extent different from the contents covered in the national exam. In the syllabi, there appeared guided writing followed by free writing on paragraph and essay development. The textbooks provided free writing activities on argumentation, description, narration, and expository discourse. The activities required students to mention points under the three parts, i.e., introduction, body and conclusion. However, the national examination item contents were too much technical as compared to the writing activities provided in the syllabi. One of the teachers replied that, *"In the Ethiopian University English Entrance Examination those activities mentioned in the syllabi such as, argumentation and description are not included, but only identifying essay writing types, letter writing and its parts, spelling and punctuation appear"*.

Other English language teacher respondents replied in a similar way, *"National test experts give more emphasis to essay writing types and letter writing specially personal letter formats, parts, and contents. They focused on punctuation and spelling of words."* These teachers noted that there were major differences between the contents of the syllabi and the exams. Thus, the teachers were teaching the writing contents based on the domain of the tests. The objectives of the textbooks required students to write composition at paragraph and essay levels. However, in the national exams, the scope of the questions was limited only on identifying the discourse types among the given alternatives. So, the students are restricted at sentence level. Therefore, there was a mismatch between the writing skill contents appeared in the exams and the objectives stated in the syllabi.

Another teacher replied that, *“Because the questions prescribed in the syllabi are not equivalent to the questions of the national exam, I am merely motivated to do past entrance exam sheets instead of focusing on the activities given in the textbook.* This showed that because of the mismatch between the syllabi and the exams in terms of writing skill contents, the teachers were not motivated to offer genre writing lessons based on the objectives stated in the textbooks. They were motivated to do questions in the previous exam sheets. So, composition writing activities were given less emphasis. During the observation, it was also noticed that the teachers writing activities that did not require students to develop paragraphs and essays unlike that of the contents presented in the syllabi. According to Simachew (2012), Ethiopian University Entrance Examination affected the domains of teaching and learning to be exam-oriented. Teachers’ perceived awareness of the exam and students’ learning and the teachers’ experiences mediated washback on their practice.

Moreover, students replied that they noticed significant differences between the writing items of the national exams and the writing genres given in the textbook. Since they strived to pass the exam and join a university, they were motivated to give attention more on the contents they expected to appear in the national exam, such as spelling, letter writing and punctuation marks. They added punctuation, paragraph types, letter writing and spelling should also be taught although they received little attention in the syllabi. One student remarked that, *“Unless my teacher is wise enough to teach those skills appeared in the exams systematically and separately, it is impossible to catch my attention in the classroom”.* This revealed that the students required their teachers to do questions related to the national exams. However, they were not motivated to learn genres of writing skills in the classroom as they did not appear in the exams. Thus, the predominant objectives of the students were not to develop their skill on genres of writing. Instead, they attempted to gain good scores on the exams. Similarly, Alderson and Wall (1993) stated that when test contents and formats are not designed based on the stated objectives of the syllabus and the practice of teaching and learning, it de-motivates students to work and study hard, and develop sense of accomplishments.

To check if the genres of writing activities were delivered in the EFL classroom as stated in the syllabi, observation was conducted by the researchers. It was found out that the teachers taught paragraph types (argumentative, narrative, expository and descriptive). They gave statements and asked the students to match with their respective genre types. However, the students were not made to write paragraphs/essays of these types although they appeared in the syllabi. The teachers also taught spelling rules and their functions, report writing and its contents and formats, letter types. During the observation, it was also noticed that the students came to classroom with some previous national exams and asked their teachers to make explanations and give instances of the same type.

In general, the findings of the observation and interviews indicated that teachers in the classroom tended to teach according to the domain of the national exams. The students also endeavored to pass exams but not to meet the prescribed objectives of the syllabi. So, the teaching and learning of the writing skills remained exam-oriented. This is in line with Simachew’s (2012) findings: the exam yielded overt, strong, and harmful washback effect on teachers’ and students’ practices that in turn led the implementation of the syllabus to be less successful.

Conclusions

The genres of writing skills established in the syllabi and their coverage in Ethiopian University Entrance Examination were not the same. Those writing activities which were given more weight in the syllabi, (paragraph and essay development), did not receive the desired attention in the national exams. The objectives of the syllabi stated that students should write narrative, argumentative, descriptive and expository essays. However, in the national exams, there was no room for students to write a paragraph/ an essay. In addition, teachers' perceived awareness of the exams, and pressure in teaching experiences mediated washback effect on their practices. The teachers in the classroom focused on contents appeared in the national exams. Similarly, students' perceived ambition for success in the exam, importance of the exam, awareness of the exam, interest in learning the writing skill mediated washback effect on their practices.

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