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Beyond the washback of the English National Exam on learning: Subsequent impact on language learning strategies of first-year English majors



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Abstract

The study aims to investigate washback of the English National Exam (ENE) on learning and how they impacted English language learning strategies of first-year English majors at University of Foreign Language Studies, The University of Danang (UFLS, UD). Data was collected from a questionnaire administered to 120 first-year English majors and an interview conducted with ten randomly-selected students from the focus group. The findings indicated that given the ENE 2018 as an objective test with emphasis on language knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) and reading skills, previous learning practices of first-year English majors as the washback of ENE resulted in intense memorization of language knowledge to perform test-preparation exercises rather than concentrating on developing non-tested skills (listening, speaking, and writing). While some previous English learning practices have inherently benefited first-year English majors, they mainly exert negative effects and drive first-year English majors to develop and modify pre-existent strategies as well as adopt new ones for the development of all language skills. The study is instrumental in depicting potential effects of previous learning practices for the ENE on higher education specializing in English, thereby preparing first-year English majors to make adjustments and accommodate themselves with appropriate learning strategies at UFLS, UD.

Keywords: English National Exam (ENE), washback effects, learning practices, English language learning strategies, first-year English majors

Introduction

Test washback has been identified as an area of broad interest in the last few decades (Bailey, 1996; Hughes, 1989; Caine, 2005), and different opinions have been harbored with reference to the degree of washback. Some researchers indicated no level of washback in their studies (Shih, 2007, Watanabe,

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2014) whereas others showed concrete evidence on strong effects of washback (Amporn, 2011). Therefore, it is evident that washback may vary depending on the educational contexts.

Each country has designed different methods of selection for entry to university education. Amongst them is high-stake testing, in the form of national exam. Estimating effects of the national exam on learning is difficult and disagreement remains on whether it facilitates or impedes learning. Domench (2000) believed that students devote an inordinate amount of time to drills in which memorizing facts takes precedence over approaches to genuine learning including problem solving and critical thinking. On the other hand, the national exam aims to keep students motivated and focused on their expected achievement level, hence fostering their ability to obtain and demonstrate required knowledge for test taking (Domench, 2000). Therefore, several consequences pertain to running and taking high-stake testing.

In Vietnam, with respect to the English National Exam (ENE), the ultimate goal of satisfactory achievement in the ENE has been of paramount importance as the precursor to gain admission to tertiary education. Test takers of the ENE are required to study a wealth of knowledge related to language conventions in order to develop structural accuracy in multiple-choice grammatical, lexical test items and reading comprehension questions. However, from my observation as the test-taker in the ENE, a large number of first-year English majors of my academic intake encountered major difficulties at the transition to enter English learning programs offered by UFLS, UD. They found it challenging to steer themselves in exploration of new learning environment and meet learning outcomes of the skill-integrated curriculum. It remains a thought-provoking issue as to the extent in which the ENE had any washback on learning practices and whether previous learning practices for the ENE were the driving force for first-year English majors to devise corresponding English language learning strategies (hereafter, learning strategies) at the University of Foreign Language Studies, University of Danang (UFLS, UD). The duplicated impacts of the ENE on learning strategies at the transfer to higher education have not been exhaustively examined, especially in Vietnam.

By exploring previous learning practices of the examinees of the ENE, the study aims to shed light on the extent to which previous learning practices as the washback of the ENE affect learning strategies of first-year English majors, guided by the following questions:

- (1) What were the previous learning practices of first-year English majors for the ENE 2018?
- (2) To what extent have the previous learning practices for the ENE 2018 affected learning strategies of first-year English majors at UFLS, UD?

Literature Review

Test washback

Washback is often generalized as the effect of testing on teaching and learning (Hughes, 1989) and is characterized as a neutral term that could be either negative or positive (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Positive washback could be considered beneficial in promoting learning activities, encouraging positive attitudes toward the test and improving motivation (ibid). On the other hand, a test has negative washback if test anxiety and fear of poor performance are the breeding ground for overemphasis on the skills tested (Tzagari, 2011).

Bailey (1996) constructed a model comprised of two parts (a) washback to the learner derived from the effects on test-takers and (b) washback to the programme involving teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, counselors and so on. In this paper, only washback to learners is discussed,

with some examples as follows:

- 1) Practicing items similar in format to those on the test.
- 2) Studying vocabulary and grammar rules.
- 3) Participating in interactive language practice (e.g., target language conversations).
- 4) Reading widely in the target language.
- 5) Listening to non-interactive language (radio, television, etc.).
- 6) Applying test-taking strategies.
- 7) Enrolling in test-preparation courses.
- 8) Requesting guidance in their studying and feedback on their performance.
- 9) Skipping language classes to study for the test.

Alderson and Wall (1993) proposed washback hypotheses on aspects of learning.

- 1) A test will influence learning.
- 2) A test will influence how learners learn.
- 3) A test will influence the rate and sequence of learning.
- 4) A test will influence the degree and depth of learning.
- 5) A test will influence attitudes to the content, method, etc., of learning.
- 6) Tests will have washback on all learners.
- 7) Tests will have washback effects for some learners, but not for others.

In attempts to validate those hypotheses, a wide range of research into test washback has been undertaken, especially related to high-stakes language testing. Watanabe (2004) situated the washback of the English section of the Japanese national university entrance exam in classroom instructions, identifying areas of assumptions about the test washback such as excessive reliance on grammar-translation methods at the expense of oral English use, negligence on applying formal structures in authentic situations of language use and repetition in classroom organization. However, the manner in which teachers could utilize the exam preparation process as a vehicle to enhance English language proficiency of students for communicative contexts was indicative of positive washback. On the other hand, Chen (2006) investigated into the Basic Skills Test (BCT), administered among Taiwan junior high schools as a high school entrance exam for English, and found that teaching was inclined towards the test rather than the goal of the curriculum as communicative competences. Similarly, as to Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination, teaching delivery with orientation towards test content displayed negative washback though the exam seeks to promote task-based approaches to teaching (Cheng, 2004, 2005). In a study by Qi (2004), washback of the English National Matriculation Test in China which was aimed to be positive as a transition from formal language knowledge to communicative language use ended up being an emphasis on instructions of language conventions. The author suggested that the exam brought about washback effects on language teaching and learning environments in China. From another perspective, Salehi and Yunus (2012) studied high school English teachers' perceptions about the effects of the National University Entrance Exam in Iran. They indicated psychological pressure and anxiety English teachers as negative washback suffered due to the test.

Regarding washback studies on student learning, they are principally associated with actual students' performances. Diez-Bedmar (2011) examined pre-university student's competences for writing through error identifications after the University Entrance Exam in Jaén, Spain. Saif (2006) analysed test scores before, during and after a language training program and suggested a positive relationship between preparations for the (ITA) test and learning outcomes. However, as the researcher stressed, the research contexts at institutional level were too limited to be generalised to other settings. Similarly,

Read and Hayes (2003) concluded no improvements in students' performances after looking at two groups of students sitting the retired version of the IELTS exam as pre- and post-tests to two IELTS courses.

In light of the previous studies, there is a tendency centralized on finding washback evidence in teaching practices. According to Tsagari (2011), washback research on student learning has been misguided by vague definition of what is meant by student learning, only based on limited scales and not documented with untrustworthy approaches to produce considerable gains. Little research has also been carried out to find out washback on how students learned, not to mention the possibility of subsequent impacts that previous learning practices produce on the specific group of test takers who, in Vietnam's educational system, will progress to higher level of education specialized in English. Given this research attention, it is necessary to investigate the effects of previous learning practices for the ENE on learning strategies adopted by first-year English majors, with a view to contributing to the mainstream literature of language testing, supporting students to boost their academic performance in the first year of higher education and giving suggestions on how to minimize negative effects from previous learning practices.

Language learning strategies

Language learning strategies are classified into six major groups: cognitive, metacognitive, memory-related, compensatory, affective, and social. They are identified by Oxford (1990) and further developed in alternative taxonomies by O'Malley and Chamot (1990).

- Cognitive strategies enable the learner to manipulate the language material in direct ways, for example, through reasoning, analysis, note-taking, summarizing, synthesizing, outlining, reorganizing information to develop stronger schemas (knowledge structures), practicing in naturalistic settings, and practicing structures and sounds formally.
- Metacognitive strategies involve learners identifying their own learning style preferences and needs, planning for an L2 task, gathering and organizing materials, arranging a study space and a schedule, monitoring mistakes, and evaluating task success, and evaluating the success of any type of learning strategy.
- Memory-related strategies help learners to link one L2 item or concept with another but do not necessarily involve deep understanding. Various memory-related strategies enable learners to learn and retrieve information in an orderly string (e.g., acronyms), while other techniques create learning and retrieval via sounds (e.g., rhyming), images (e.g., a mental picture of the word itself or the meaning of the word), a combination of sounds and images (e.g., the keyword method), body movement (e.g., total physical response), mechanical means (e.g., flashcards), or location (e.g., on a page or blackboard).
- Compensatory strategies are associated with guessing from the context in listening and reading; using synonyms and "talking around" the missing word to aid speaking and writing; and strictly for speaking, using gestures or pause to help the learner make up for missing knowledge.
- Affective strategies which have to do with identifying one's mood and anxiety level, talking about feelings, rewarding oneself for good performance, and using deep breathing or positive self-talk have been shown to be related to L2 proficiency.
- Social strategies (e.g., asking questions to get verification, asking for clarification of a confusing point, asking for help in doing a language task, talking with a native-speaking conversation partner, and exploring cultural and social norms) help the learner work with others and understand the target culture as well as the language.

According to Liu (2010), Oxford (1990) successfully developed a system of language learning strategies that is much more comprehensive and easier to understand than previous authors. Therefore, this classification of language learning strategies by Oxford (1990) is employed as the theoretical framework for the study whereby the components of each strategy at higher education are examined to discover how they are impacted by the ENE washback.

Test washback and English language learning strategies

Test washback is found to exert positive impacts on the metacognitive facets of English language learning strategies. Deci and Ryan (2016) postulate that test takers of high-stake English testing positively generate extrinsic motivation by devoting more considerable efforts in making alterations to their learning practices, improving test performances and engendering the sense of accomplishment (Cavendish, Márquez, Roberts, Suarez & Lima, 2017). Considering the mainstream contexts of learning English in Vietnam, students' learning progress is stimulated as a consequence of high-stakes English testing because the realizations of their own abilities prompt them to be conceivable of knowledge and skills to be improved (Stecher, 2010). PoPham (2014) suggest that those being subject to limited English proficiency and a feeling of demotivation in English language learning at high school can identify their strengths and weaknesses as part of their self-assessment on learning outcomes.

Despite the reasoning for students' motivation to derive meaning from learning (Roderick & Engel, 2001), a large body of literature has revealed how test washback obstructs the affective facets of English learning strategies due to diminished cognitive functioning when students feel apprehended about failing the test, short of self-confidence in preparation for the assessment (In'nami, 2006). Instead of being intrinsically motivated, they envision themselves to be susceptible to failures in test-taking situations. This can "make learners get discouraged, lose faith in their abilities, escape from participating in classroom activities, and even give up the effort to learn a language well" (Na, 2007, p. 30).

Materials and Methods

Overview of the English National Exam 2018

In order to get admission to Vietnamese universities and colleges, it is obligatory to obtain a high school diploma as a prerequisite and achieve a passing performance score in a competitive admission process known as University Entrance Examination (UEE) as a means of comparing and selecting candidates. The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) is in charge of designing all subject test papers that are administered in conjunction with universities and colleges and selecting one national minimum score for considerations of admission to any college or university. To be admitted to the intended program, candidates must take three regulated subject tests and achieve a minimum total score set by each institution, which is often higher than the minimum requirement set by the MOET. Most state-funded universities have a limited number of places for students of each major whose scores on the UEE are ranked in descending order for selections. Given the selection test result in Vietnam is essentially the only criterion for tertiary education admission, the importance accorded to its quality and decisiveness cannot be overemphasized. Having said that, the determination to pass the exam may ultimately affect test-takers in which one of the possible effects is associated with adjustments to learning practices in favour of test preparation techniques.

Candidates who envision their career paths as prospective English language teachers, interpreters, or foreign traders are required to take English test paper as a mandatory component of the National Exam

2018, alongside math and literature. To ensure the practicality and easy administration of test running and marking, the ENE is designed as an objective test. There are 50 multiple choice questions intended for testing language knowledge and reading while listening, speaking and writing are not tested explicitly (table 1). Although there is a section labeled as Writing, test takers are not supposed to produce any piece of writing based on a specific register. Instead, they are required to identify the new sentence with the closest meaning as the given one; or identify the accuracy in combining two single sentences. Given the partly decisiveness of the English test paper, there is some concern about the shift of emphasis on cramming for language knowledge as test preparation strategies, in replacement for skill practice of genuine learning.

Table 1 Test matrix of ENE 2018

Language knowledge/ skills	Question types	No. questions	Level of complexity			
			Recognition	Understanding	Application	Advanced
Pronunciation	Pronunciation patterns	2	2		0	0
	Stress patterns	2	0	2	0	0
Grammar - Vocabulary	Grammar	8	2	2	2	2
	Lexical Resources	6	1	1	2	2
	Synonyms	2	0	1	1	0
	Antonyms	3	1	1	1	0
	Error Identification	3	1	1	1	0
Language Use	Communicative Functions	2	1	1	0	0
Reading	Cloze Reading	5	1	2	1	1
	Comprehension questions	13	2	3	4	4
Writing	Sentences with closest meaning	3	0	1	1	1
	Sentence combination	2	0	0	2	0
	Total	50	10	15	15	10

Research design

This is a descriptive study using numerical evidence supported by qualitative information. Both sources of data were collected in sequence. Sequential data collection of the study involves collecting data in two stages. The numerical data is collected in the first stage, and the quantitative results will be justified by the second qualitative form of data collection for exploratory design (Creswell, 2005).

The numerical evidence was initially collected through the questionnaire administered to the focused groups of first-year English majors. Descriptive data was collected in form of frequency and percentage, to elaborate on (a) previous learning practices for the ENE 2018 and (b) learning strategies in the first year as the result of previous learning practices. The quantitative information followed through by in-depth interviews on the same individuals, but with smaller sample size to provide more details about the qualitative results. Focused samples of first-year English majors were asked to reflect and give evaluative comments on how previous learning practices have contributed to driving the establishment of learning strategies serving their first year at university.

Description of population and samples

This study was conducted on first-year English majors of the academic intake 2018 at UFLS, UD who took the English test paper and successfully passed the ENE. Students from previous academic intakes were excluded. The samples of both stages of the study were instances of responses of first-year English majors from the Faculty of English and Faculty of Foreign Language Teacher Education at UFLS, UD to the questionnaire and their responses to a series of interview questions. The sample size

for the questionnaire was 120 first-year English majors. Out of 120 students, ten were asked to respond to interviews after the survey.

All participants scored over the passing rate – 5 out of 10 marks. Of these, 64% achieved scores distributed between 7 and 10, which is viewed to be a good and excellent result respectively. In all, 85% of respondents spent 1-2 years studying for the test, and 72% of them spent 3-5 hours each day accumulating knowledge and doing revisions for the ENE 2018. It can be seen that they devoted a large amount of time and concerted effort to gaining satisfactory achievements that offered them admission to UFLS, UD.

Given the total of 386 first-year English majors of the academic intake 2018 (according to the statistics from Office of Student Affairs), it is not feasible to carry out the study on that scale. Therefore, the samples are chosen on the basis of simple random sampling that proves to be convenient, inexpensive and time-saving (Salkind, 2006). According to Hair, Anderson, Tatham, and Black (1998), the size of samples should be optimally at least five times as large as the number of independent variables that are employed for the exploratory research design. Hence, twenty question items were included in the main parts of the questionnaire, and at least 100 samples were required for the study. In order to ensure this number could be achieved, 120 samples were administered in case of any inaccuracies in filling in the questionnaires arose that might have detracted from the data collection process.

Data collection methods

Data of the research comes from two main sources: a structured questionnaire and a set of semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire was administered to 120 first-year English majors, and consisted of two parts. Part One had demographic questions about what area of study the informants pursued (either English, Teaching English as a Foreign Language, or English Teaching with a specialization in primary school students), what their ENE 2018 score was, and their estimated duration for the exam preparation. Part Two, with two sub-sections, had Likert-scale questions and was well-grounded on relevant literature about washback by Bailey (1996) and language learning strategies by Oxford (1990). Section 1 dealt with previous learning practices for the ENE 2018, and participants answered the questions on the five-point Likert scale of frequency, from 1 (Always) to 5 (Never) to determine the prevalent learning practices. Section 2 focused on the effects of previous learning practices on learning strategies of first-year English majors. The questions in this section were answered on a five-point scale of agreement, from 1 (Strongly Agree) to 5 (Strongly Disagree). The questionnaire was piloted to (a) test the internal reliability of the instrument, (b) obtain estimates about expected response rates, data quality, validity and comprehensibility of the questionnaire, and (c) foresee the problems that may arise due to the wording of question items (Mackey & Gass, 2005; Silman, Macfarlane, & Macfarlane, 2001). After the pilot, incomprehensible wording was mitigated, along with further revisions to ensure the clarity of question items.

Table 2 Demographic information of student interviewees

Participants	Major
P. 1, 2, 3, 4	English Translation and Interpreting
P. 5, 6, 7	Teaching English as a Foreign Language
P. 8, 9, 10	Teaching English for Primary schools

The interview questions were developed by using a similar procedure as the development of questionnaire items. Interview responses were used as a supplement to illustrate the quantitative results

of the questionnaire. After the questionnaire session had been completed, ten students were selected against random sampling, given the complexity of the research problem (Salkind, 2006). To comply with the ethics of ambiguity, they are all encoded from P.1 to P.10. According to Creswell (2005), typically when cases are reported, a small number, ranging from 4 to 10, is feasible if it relates to narrative, grounded theory or case study research. With respect to the accurate collection of data during the interviews, all the sessions were carried out in Vietnamese. As both the researcher and the participants of this study are native speakers of Vietnamese, this practice was intended to rule out any possibility of miscommunication and the effects of language barrier.

Results and Discussion

Previous learning practices of first-year English majors for the ENE 2018

According to Table 3, in light of the English language learning at high school during the preparation for the ENE, over 72% of first-year English majors always and frequently focused on having practice with textbook exercises of reading parts and “Language Focus” parts including vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Only under 20% regularly did the speaking and writing prompts that were provided as part of the English textbook.

Table 3 Frequency in doing English textbook exercises and note-taking at high school

	Always/ Often	Sometimes	Rarely/ Never
English textbook exercises			
Reading exercises	77%	21%	2%
Listening exercises	1%	49%	51%
Grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation exercises	72%	22%	6%
Writing prompts	18%	36%	46%
Speaking tasks	20%	42%	38%
In-class note-taking			
New grammar points	83%	14%	3%
New words and their meaning	87%	12%	1%
Pronunciation and stress rules	68%	29%	3%
Feedback from teachers for speaking tasks	37%	50%	13%
Feedback from teachers for writing prompts	37%	42%	21%

The process of instructing and learning language knowledge was also demonstrated from other learning practices. An average 70% centralized their note taking on language conventions, new words and their pronunciation as well as stress rules. Not limited to that, over 63% regularly had interaction with teachers and other high-achieving students to “ask for assistance in dealing with reading and grammar exercises” (Figure 1).

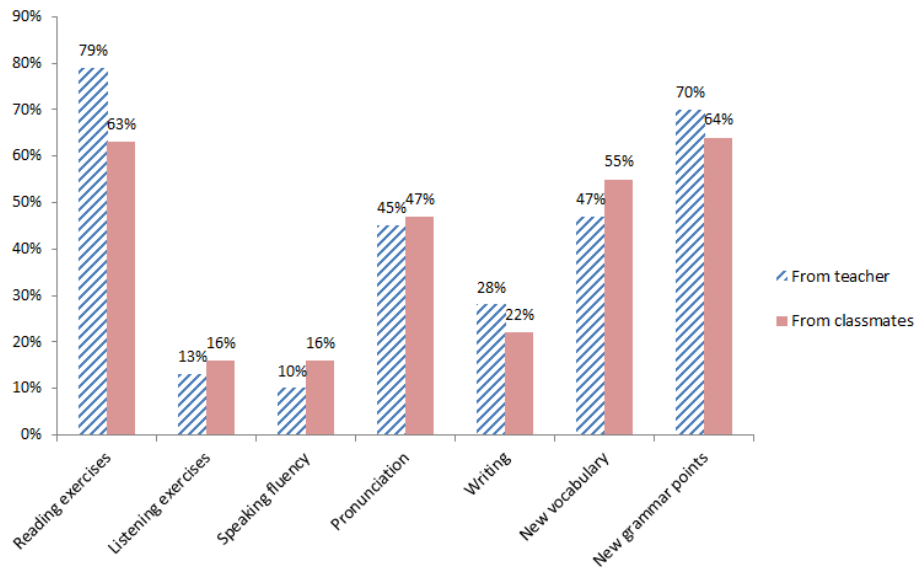


Figure 1 Asking for help from the teacher and classmates

Apart from learning English in formal classrooms, over 80% of respondents pursued extra tutoring in exam preparation classes. Consulting test takers of the previous exams, they took this course of action because “the test content was seemingly beyond the difficulty of grammar knowledge and vocabulary as provided in the English textbook”. Based on Tables 4 and 5, in the exam preparation classes, the exercises that resembled with the test format to consolidate language knowledge, expand lexical resources and cultivate reading skills were employed to the highest level of frequency while listening, speaking or writing activities remained marginalized. Furthermore, extensive note-taking was

Table 4 Frequency of different activities designed in exam preparation classes

	Always/ Often	Sometimes	Rarely/ Never
Doing exercises			
Consolidating grammar knowledge	95%	5%	0%
Expanding lexical resources	92%	8%	0%
Remembering pronunciation and stress rules	83%	17%	0%
Practicing reading	96%	4%	0%
Practicing listening	0%	3%	97%
Combining sentences	72%	28%	0%
Identifying sentences of the closest meaning	78%	12%	0%
Doing other learning activities			
Note-taking on advanced grammar	72%	22%	6%
Note-taking on pronunciation and stress rules	77%	16%	7%
Note-taking on new vocabulary in reading passages	90%	6%	4%
Writing practice on prompts of basic register	2%	20%	78%
Conversation practices and short individual turn	2%	10%	88%

primarily focused on advanced grammatical knowledge, pronunciation rules and new words used in reading texts. Besides asking for recommendations to mitigate learning difficulties, a large number of respondents also usually spent time at extra tutoring classes discussing test-taking strategies with their teachers. Meanwhile, the instructions on how to memorize vocabulary better or deal with uncommon words in reading were underrepresented. Being inquired whether the respondents were satisfied with such overemphasis on restrained learning content, it is known that even though they desired to be given more learning opportunities and enhance production skills, given the pressure from the ENE, they were reluctant to prioritize the acquisition of language knowledge in order to feel self-assured.

Table 5 *Frequency of interaction with teachers in exam preparation classes*

	Always/ Often	Sometimes	Rarely/ Never
Confusion during practice with mock tests	81%	13%	6%
Difficulties during the exam preparation	66%	23%	11%
Effective test-taking strategies	72%	20%	8%
Memorization techniques for new words	18%	16%	66%
Word-guessing techniques in reading	15%	7%	78%
Ability to maintain speaking fluency	0%	6%	93%
Pronunciation	25%	38%	37%
Generation and development of ideas during writing	5%	12%	83%

With respect to other learning practices listed in Table 6 overleaf, the majority spent their time on self-study in order to reinforce the knowledge they were still ill-equipped with. The most preferable self-directed English learning activities carried out by almost all of the respondents were practice grammar exercises and memorize newly-acquired words, which was inextricably associated with the ENE. Particularly, when the test approached, 85% allocated a large amount of time to mock tests from test preparation materials. The following response from the interview revealed how the exam required such a high level of persistence and industriousness from students outside the classroom:

“In the last year of exam preparation, I never stopped studying grammar and answering mock test papers when the test date came closer. I memorized vocabulary continuously, sometimes by writing the new words I learned on small vocabulary cards in my pockets.” (P.8)

Grammar exercises were the most prevalent as the self-study practice exercises, which proved more than 60% rarely or never set aside time for getting involved in speaking skill development. Regarding other self-directed activities, 93% were rarely or never recorded with much time allocation for reading English books or magazines as they found those resources “unnecessary and irrelevant to the exam preparation.” Meanwhile, 45% were reported to occasionally watch movies and television programs in English as “relaxation to alleviate intense pressure from the exam” rather than as an input for language skill practices.

Effects of previous learning practices for the ENE 2018 on English language learning strategies of first-year English majors at UFLS-UD

The previous learning practices as the ENE washback, on one hand, revealed positive impacts on the study of English based on the skill-integrated curriculum at UFLS, UD (Table 7). As many as 70% of

first-year English majors positioned their view on significant progress in active note taking in lectures as the result of frequent practice in exam preparation classes beforehand.

“I had to be very attentive in test preparation classes, being multi-tasking, understanding knowledge and jotting it down in the material for revision later on. Thanks to that, I have had no problem with the fast pace of note-taking and organizing it at university.” (P.6)

Table 6 *Frequency of other learning practices outside the classroom*

	Always/ Often	Sometimes	Rarely/ Never
Self-study to consolidate ill-equipped knowledge	74%	20%	6%
Do further grammar exercises	80%	16%	4%
Memorize new words	77%	11%	2%
Answer mock tests	85%	12%	3%
Study with friends	44%	46%	10%
Read English books or newspapers	2%	5%	93%
Watch English movies or television programs	37%	45%	18%
Learn from online English instructional videos	38%	44%	18%
Practice speaking with friends	7%	32%	61%
Research on how to develop speaking fluency	6%	28%	66%

Moreover, the regular undertaking of self-directed learning activities before the ENE has been invaluable to roughly 75% in the sense that they have gained insights into the way of setting goals and monitoring the learning progress.

“When I studied for the exam, I always spent time looking back on in-class practice exercises at home to know which domain of knowledge I was not good at and took necessary steps for improvement. That gradually became a learning habit and is repeated in university every time I finished lectures and ended up with the sense of insecurity about what I studied in the class.” (P.5)

Another desirable effect after revising and sitting for the ENE is the demanding nature of this high-stakes testing enabled them to be mentally enduring. They reflected on the nerve-racking time in struggle with a large amount of homework assignment or the constant worry about poor performances with mock tests having placed them under tremendous pressure. Finding themselves in such hardship, they envisioned some of the effective ways to rule out the intervention of negative feelings from tertiary studies as follows:

“I had positive attitudes no matter how tough it was to study for the exam; sometimes there’s no point rushing since I might risk making things worse. I learnt that keeping me self-assured under any circumstances would make everything alright in the end.” (P.2)

Notably, 66% have reaped benefits from interaction with lecturers and classmates at UFLS, UD thanks

to previous learning experience.

“I constantly get teachers and friends to explain what I was confused about, knowing how to approach others when I needed help. That really helps me study English with more ease here [at UFLS – UD]. I can even learn a lot by exchanging information with my peers.” (P.1)

Table 7 Effects of previous learning practices for the ENE 2018 on English language learning strategies in the first year at UFLS – UD

	Completely agree / Agree	Neutral	Disagree/ Completely disagree
Cognitive strategies			
Help with note-taking in class	70%	19%	11%
Metacognitive strategies			
Help with goal setting and planning for studies	73%	20%	7%
Help with the monitoring of ill-equipped knowledge	75%	13%	12%
Help with better arrangement for learning	73%	16%	11%
Help with better envisaging of how to develop overall English abilities	8%	11%	81%
Memory-related strategies			
Help with better memorization of knowledge	18%	2%	80%
Affective strategies			
Help with better control of feelings in hardship	65%	26%	9%
Help with self-encouragement in learning English	71%	22%	7%
Social strategies			
Help with the autonomy in asking for help from teachers and friends	66%	25%	9%

On the other hand, approximately 80% pronounced the judgment that previous learning practices failed to assist them in retaining new words (Table 7). Having said that, 67% worked on memory-related strategies again, making some adjustments to boost their capacity for memorizing (Table 8). The following extract of an interview demonstrates how they saw the effects of the exam on their English in this respect:

“I think I can say that it [the ENE] had some good effects in terms of vocabulary; however, we just did rote learning. We never studied speaking or writing to actually use and remember new words. You just memorize and everything’s just gone soon.” (P.3)

All students in the interview stated that they encountered difficulties in learning at UFLS, UD because of the ENE and their previous learning practices. Specifically, as the result of following tricks to recognize the answer or rule out wrong alternatives for the correct one, students struggled in learning production skills which require reasoning and critical thinking.

“Learning about test taking strategies did not help me develop my language abilities. I mean the strategies did not focus on meaning since they were tricks like what to put after a period or comma, or a particular structure. I couldn’t use those strategies here [at UFLS, UD] because there are open-ended questions; it’s hard to think on your own and answer them.” (P.9)

Understanding this problem, 78% started to embark on the practice of critical thinking which is viewed as part of the cognitive strategies. They found it necessary to “place the learning process into personal perspectives in order to form opinions and generate ideas in dealing with language learning tasks, especially writing”.

In all, 81% opined that previous learning practices for the ENE failed to serve as the platform to learn four language skills at UFLS, UD. Some responses from the interviews indicated how negligence of listening skills and production skills translated into difficulties.

“The way I prepared for the exam had a lot to do with the difficulties in my first year. If there had been a writing part in the exam, I would have studied for it, and it would have helped us at university in some ways. Now it has become quite stressful to me in most writing lessons.” (P.4)

“To study for the exam, we never did speaking as it would only have been a waste of time. We would have been better in communication, but couldn’t have passed.” (P.1)

“I didn’t pay attention to listening lessons at high school because the ENE didn’t cover this component. I used to learn about pronunciation and stress rules, but they prove no usefulness now when I have to perform listening comprehension exercises. I find it hard to recognize words, keep pace with the speakers and identify myself with their accent from recordings.” (P.8)

Moreover, the intense learning of grammar knowledge was not instrumental in assisting first-year English majors to convey and negotiate meaning. The following extract illustrates how the exam impedes students’ ability to put structural language they acquired into contexts:

“I could tell what is right and wrong in terms of structures; but when I practiced speaking and writing here [at UFLD – UD], I just felt secure enough to use single sentences as basic grammar. Even though I am aware that I should put more complex structures into use, it was really a struggle to know where and how to place them.” (P.10)

It is also worth noting that the exam also had some negative effects on vocabulary knowledge of students, despite the fact that students spent a great amount of time studying it. Given study of vocabulary with an emphasis on performing reading and gap filling exercises, students said that they “constructed their vocabulary knowledge on word meaning by memorizing a great number of words, but they generally disregarded connotational or contextual aspects of vocabulary.”

Driven from such shortcomings of the ENE that have interfered with the development of four language skills at UFLS, UD, according to Table 8, the majority raised awareness of metacognitive strategies by understanding the need to develop listening, speaking and writing.

“Now in the speaking class, having quick responses to a question is challenging to me. It takes me quite a lot of time to say words out at first as well as maintain speech and thinking at the same time. I need to work on that a lot.” (P.2)

“A lot of learners from previous academic intakes and even lecturers of my class recommend passive listening, just to get familiar with the accent. I am practising this approach on a daily basis and will see how it works.” (P.7)

“I haven’t known styles and registers of writing until taking writing classes at university. My written work from the beginning got feedback regarding repetition of structures and wrong word use. I find a compelling need to improve those aspects.” (P.8)

Regarding compensatory strategies, 45% were interested in developing them in order to maintain speaking fluency. Meanwhile, others held different views, saying that they should “prioritize other strategies to underpin a strong platform for taking English proficiency to a higher level before planning to learn about some other supportive techniques”. However, regarding compensatory strategies for reading, 62% took certain course of action to practise word guessing techniques.

“The reading texts I practiced for the ENE had a lot of new words; but the teacher did not show how to guess their meaning. When I encountered new vocabulary, I just looked up every single word and moved on. Here [at university] I should learn to be more strategic to better cope with unknown words in reading.” (P.4)

Table 8 English language learning strategies at UFLS – UD after the ENE 2018

	Completely agree / Agree	Neutral	Disagree / Completely disagree
Cognitive strategies			
Develop reasoning and idea generation in learning English	78%	9%	13%
Metacognitive strategies			
Need to develop listening skills	64%	26%	10%
Need to develop speaking skills	85%	15%	0%
Need to develop useful approaches to writing skills	80%	20%	0%
Memory-related strategies			
Find out effective memorization techniques	67%	18%	15%
Compensatory strategies			
Practice guessing unknown words in reading	62%	35%	3%
Improvise with missing words in communication	45%	51%	4%
Social strategies			
Interact with native speakers of the English language	95%	5%	0%
Explore culture of English-speaking countries	36%	49%	15%

With regard to social strategies, 95% agreed that increased interaction with native speakers was of

paramount importance to their English language learning strategies during the first year at UFLS – UD. After learning with native speakers in a few language classes, they would consider this way as an invaluable method to count on.

“It has been very useful to interact with native speakers in the class. They showed me some mistakes in pronunciation and how I could correct commonly-mispronounced words. I realize I can be much more responsive in speaking than ever before.” (P.6)

However, only 36% expected to explore target culture by interacting with native speakers in the first year at UFLS – UD. After having neglected speaking and writing during the ENE, they suggest it was not until they could enhance those skills that they would consider developing cultural awareness in later years.

Discussion

Negative washback of the ENE on learning practices of first-year English majors was documented. Even though they put greater emphasis on underpinning a great platform for the extension of knowledge about grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation; as well as enhancing reading skills, a large number of students were intimidated by the fear of failure and enrolled for extra-tutoring classes as a consequence to have language knowledge consolidated through the completion of exercises from additional learning materials. This contributes to the body of washback evidence on learners suggested by Bailey (1993) including studying vocabulary and grammar rules and enrolling in test-preparation courses; as well as Tsagari (2011) regarding how students' learning become test-tailored due to test anxiety. Although students were supposed to learn an inordinate amount of vocabulary to take the ENE, they were not instructed to learn how to improvise with unknown words in reading or vocabulary exercises. That confirms the hypothesis given by Alderson and Wall (1993) about the narrow depth of learning towards the test content. Previous learning practices included but were not limited to explicit studies for the exam such as answering mock questions and interacting with teachers to be informed of some useful test-taking strategies. The findings shed light on examples of washback pertaining to learners' inclination to practice items similar to test questions and apply test-taking strategies (Bailey, 1993).

Students also undertook self-directed learning activities outside the formal classroom context in order to reinforce previously-acquired and ill-equipped knowledge. Learning autonomy was developed with much more practice exercises in resemblance with question items of the exam format; and this is an indication of negative washback by Damankesh and Babaii (2015) who suggested that students only find materials that serve test-taking purposes. Students also relied on other learning practices, specifically movies and television programs in English. Those resources were geared towards pressure relief from learning, not for the improvement of English skills. These results reiterated the thought that first-year English majors were affected by negative exam washback, devoting most of their learning time to the activities relating to the ENE at the expense of other language skills that were not tested.

Previous learning practices as the exam washback still exhibited positive impacts on learning at transition to English-specialized higher education. First-year English majors, after having sat for the ENE, developed well-established learning autonomy where they were at the position of familiarity with well-preparedness for areas of improvement in learning and positively reinforced what has been studied in the class. This evidence shows how beneficial the high-stake testing is from the perspective of meta-cognitive strategies (Stecher, 2010; PoPham, 2014) to evolve into a catalyst propelling test-takers to overcome shortcomings (Amporn, 2011). Students also learned how to deal with in-class note taking at university after the ENE, which is also a testament to the work of Shohamy (1996) in which

this learning behavior have had positive impacts by equipping them with the idea of cognitive strategies to listen more carefully and take the study more seriously. Moreover, in contrast to the belief of negative washback of the ENE on learners who were subject to apprehension and anxieties (In'nami, 2006), learning experiences tailored for this backdrop of the ENE have crystallized into the perception of affective strategies where self-encouragement techniques out of adversities in the ENE revision have been a pipeline to first-year English majors in mitigating difficulties in adaptation to a new skill-integrated curriculum at university programs. The ENE preparation, in a broader sense, has constituted a support network, both tangible and intangible, to first-year English majors who realized the efficiency of previously-adopted strategies and kept an adherence to them at UFLS, UD. What makes the current research's finding contribute to the existing literature is that positive learning behaviors were not just limited to be the outcomes of the ENE itself, but transcended when part of the cognitive, meta-cognitive and affective strategies built up beforehand have continued to be applicable and bolstered the effectiveness of study at university level.

However, it is not the case under the view of explicit learning practices that cause hindrances to later learning attempts. In that manner, the ENE is not indicated as an effective measure of English language competences for those envisaging the pursuit of specialized English programs in higher education. Test performance was entirely dependent on test takers' capacity to memorize and retrieve extensive knowledge of language conventions and structures as well as an inordinate amount of vocabulary. The research did not find evidence as to whether the test ensures content validity to accurately measure language knowledge students acquired at the time of test taking (Hughes, 1989), though one explanation for pursuit of extra tutoring classes was the difficulty of ENE surpassing learners' ability. However, the previous accumulation of language knowledge was justified as a predictive failure to be a supportive instrument for learners to manage production tasks at university. The intense exam preparation process in which students were forcibly required to do cramming proved itself to be counterproductive as they retained hardly any lexical resources that can be serviceable for practicing production skills. Excessive reliance on tricks-based performances and other test-taking strategies for achievement of good scores made them stuck at the recognition level and confronted with struggle in generation of ideas in conversational situations and written communication. In Kirkpatrick and Hlaing's study (2013), the evidence is also drawn from Myanmar's English university entrance exams whose poor construct and content validity create negative student washback that hinders critical thinking and creativity. In light of this issue, despite score distribution of the ENE falling into good and excellent ranges, there would be no guarantee about the likelihood of success that can be associated with the achievement of desirable language proficiency in the first tertiary year of English majors. As Criper and Widdowson (1975, p. 129) stated:

“To know a language means to know something about how it fulfills communicative function ... Until a learner knows how to use the resources of a grammar to send meaningful messages in real life situation, he can't be said to know the language.”

This finding is aligned with that of Sultana (2018) where the Secondary School Examination (SSE) in Bangladesh entails dissatisfaction among most stakeholders despite a high passing rate. In fact, although the SSE consists of the composition to assess test takers' writing skill, the administering of the SSE is only score oriented without an inefficient measure of students' communicative English proficiency (Sultana, 2018). In Kirkpatrick and Hlaing (2013), if seeking valuable outcomes, language tests should be a combination of not only written but also oral tests that assess a student's academic proficiency.

From another perspective, on transfer to the study of English at UFLS – UD, some previous learning practices as the result of negative washback from the ENE has deteriorated the overall language

proficiency, because of the difficulties students encountered during the first year of university. Becoming good at structural knowledge but puzzled by the inability to use knowledge acquired into production is considered as the ill-grounded connection between competence and performance, which means they might have competence, but are not able to employ it in performance. The evidence for this negative impact is supported by Andrews *et al.* (2002, pp. 220-221):

“a very superficial level of learning outcome, familiarisation with the exam format, and the rote learning of exam specific strategies and formulaic phrases... the inappropriate use of these phrases by a number of students seems indicative of memorisation rather than meaningful internalisation. In these instances, the students appear to have learnt which language features to use, but not when and how to use them appropriately.”

Given that the ENE's content was devoid of testing listening, writing, and speaking skills, it imposed obstacles on the commencement of higher education among English majors who had not been hard-wired to practice production skills as a habitual part of learning. With the high number of test takers, it is not logistically possible to suggest any form of testing other than a multiple-choice format such as interviewing or composition writing, considering possible disruptions in ensuring validity and standardization of such a high-stake exam. However, implementing the structure-oriented exam with the difficulty beyond learner's abilities, along with the fear of failure as a negative emotional approach to this decisive-to-life exam accidentally prompted test-takers to deviate from learning outcomes of English language curriculum in high schools and place less value on well-balanced development between language knowledge and skills. Having that said, the impacts of previous learning practices due to the ENE washback at transition to university education are somewhat adverse as presented in the research, which contributes to first-year English majors navigating towards intervention by modifying or dispelling pre-established strategies and maneuvering new strategies to familiarize themselves with studying language skills previously neglected.

Implications

For ENE English instructors

According to Taylor (2005, p. 154), negative effects occur “when a test's content or format is based on a narrow definition of language ability” while positive effects occur when the testing procedures encourage “good” teaching practices. However, it is argued that what constitute good teaching practices are often contextually defined (Taylor, 2005). Having that said, adjustments to the narrow instruction of grammar and lexical knowledge by English instructors for the ENE preparation are necessary. Although it entails difficulties in deviating from a focus on memorizing structural knowledge that has been deeply ingrained, ENE English instructors can be in their power realizing conventional forms and words' meaning into some learning tasks such as cue-based sentence construction from which students can envision how language input can be used. Though practising production skills in class may not be facilitated, some interactive short-turn questions and short written responses or prompts can be manipulated with teachers intentionally eliciting suggestions of ideas including words that have been instructed in order to instill in students the sense of production skills and deepen their memory of word use. Additionally, test-taking strategies with the tricks to identify answers based on certain signals of language should be minimized. More useful language tips such as guessing unknown words in reading should be provided instead to better assist students in tough reading passages.

For first-year English majors and lecturers at UFLS, UD

By drawing upon the gap between competence and performance of first-year English majors after the

ENE, it is vital to add more to cognitive strategies by developing the analysis of language input from the textbook materials as the medium in understanding how to apply grammar knowledge of sentence structures in communicational situations and writing tasks of different registers. One way to facilitate this change is by visualizing how to synthesize into an efficient system for future references. Moreover, first-year English majors need to be conscious of meta-cognitive strategies through the selection of language learning materials. Rather than over-reliance on test preparation books as before, the collection of learning resources to practise four language skills in a balanced way should be prioritized.

Considering the requirement to practice listening and get almost first-hand experience in speaking and writing, it is important that classroom instructions by lecturers of integrated-skills courses in the first year should incorporate a lot of scaffolding and modeling, walking students through detailed steps to establish a strong foundation for learning production skills. If such tangible approaches could be well-undertaken, students may succeed in accommodating themselves with a new academic setting and envisage a development trajectory of four language skills in later years.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Studies

There has been evidence of negative washback on learning practices exclusively intended for the ENE 2018. Due to the fear of failure, language knowledge and reading were overemphasized by students in English classes at both high school and extra-tutoring courses while listening and production skills were neglected. Explicit learning practices included but were not limited to note-taking and rote memorization of information, intense performances of exercises with similar test items as well as test-taking tricks and strategies to ensure passing scores for university admissions. However, the research found out that the ENE is not considered a justifiable indicator of one's English proficiency in the sense that domains of language knowledge acquired for the ENE could neither be a fundamental preparation nor prove serviceable to first-year English majors for the pursuit of tertiary curriculum crafted on language skills. As an unfavourable consequence, difficulties were involved in studying previously neglected language skills at UFLS, UD even though some previous learning practices as positive exam washback became inherent to support university education in terms of cognitive strategies (effective note-taking skill); meta-cognitive strategies (learning autonomy to monitor progress); affective strategies (emotional management in academic difficulties). To fill in this academic gap, first-year English majors have been driven to (a) add more components to pre-existent strategies by exercising critical thinking (cognitive strategies), heightening awareness of insufficiency in listening, speaking and writing (meta-cognitive strategies), promoting English language learning in communicative methods assisted by native speakers (social strategies) and (b) adjust ill-grounded approaches to pre-existent strategies by exploring effective memorizing techniques (memory-related strategies) in lieu of rote learning. A part of compensatory strategies to learn word guessing techniques in reading is newly adopted while communicative patterns to maintain speaking fluency have yet to be planned.

One of the limitations of this study is that it was restricted to only the theoretical framework of Oxford (1990) about the English language learning strategies which emerged, examining which manifestations of each component strategy were practiced by students as washback on learning during the preparatory process for the ENE and how they were subsequently impacted at transition to higher education specialized in English. In future research attempts, it is important to look at students' perceptions of other learning styles during the exam preparation process and discover how they impact the way learning strategies are adopted in higher education.

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