RESEARCH ARTICLE

WASHBACK INTENSITY OF THE STATE MATURA EXAMINATION IN ALBANIAN HIGH SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

In the range of studies on washback and its role in foreign language education the research on its dimensions has been an important component. Watanabe as cited in Cheng & Watanabe (2004: 20-21) conceptualizes washback as having the following dimensions: Specificity, intensity, length, intentionality and, value or direction.

As it can easily be noticed one of the dimensions is intensity. Given the complex nature of the phenomenon of washback which includes a range of actors and variables the intensity is also displayed in different proportions. Studies conducted so far show that it depends on the nature and status of the test, the interests of students and teachers as well as on the socio-economic environment of a particular country.

Given the nature of washback which appears like a 'chameleon' it cannot be said that research has managed to illuminate every aspect of this nature. This holds true for the intensity of this phenomenon. This paper aims at giving a modest contribution regarding the intensity of washback based on empirical material clustered in 50 high schools in Albania, from 141 teachers and 401 students.

Keywords: wash back, intensity, students, teachers, dimension

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of the reform undertaken by the Albanian government in 2006 by introducing State Matura Examination (SME) was to improve the quality of education in high schools and; avoid corruption, lack of control and favoritism during the process of students' university entrance. SME is a final test which has two functions: First, to certify the level of knowledge acquired by students at the end of high school and second, to serve as a university entry test for candidates who aspire to attend university.

The stakeholders wanted to achieve several goals through the implementation of this reform in high schools: 1. Certification - issuing a maturity diploma, which certifies that the student has finished high school education; 2. Selection-selecting top students to enter university based on the scores; 3. Monitoring-monitor

the implementation of education standards and ensuring the quality of education; 4. Informing-inform the policy makers and stakeholders for the quality of high school education and for students performance. State Matura as a testing system, consists of two compulsory exams (written Mathematics and written Literature) and two other optional subject exams. These two last exams are chosen by the student from a pool of school subjects (Chemistry, Biology, Physics, English, History-Geography and Sociology-Economy-Philosophy etc.).

Since the very first steps in the implementation of this new system English has become one of the favorite subjects by students who take SME. For the first time in the history of education in the country students consider it as one of the most important subjects with repercussions in the future of thousands of young people. Hence, SME in English is a high stakes examination which has produced positive and negative washback. This paper will focus on its intensity and the way such intensity affects teaching and learning.

1.1. Literature Review

In his efforts to offer a model of study of washback Watanable (2004) as cited in Saville (2009; pp. 29-30) identified five dimensions of washback: specificity, intensity, length, value and, intentionality. Regarding intensity Watanable (2004) as cited in Cheng &Watanable (2004: 20) points out that 'washback may be strong or weak' depending on the prominence of the test. Shih 2007 (in Mizutani 2009: 30-32) while proposing a model for the study of washback introduced the time axis which means that washback is produced over time and this axis also expresses its intensity over the time.

Sukyadi & Mardiani (2011: 96-111) noticed that the intensity of English National Examination (ENE) is strong, because ENE has a strong effect and determines everything happening in the classroom, and leads all teachers to teach in the same way toward the examination. Pizarro (2010: 163) revealed that "The English Test (ET) has a major influence on different aspects associated with the curriculum, especially with content, which is "an area as Cheng (1997: 50) stated "of high washback intensity" and that "teachers seemed to spend most of their class time practicing the skills featured in the ET and neglecting untested skills and material".

Tsagari (2011: 436) found out that "the majority of the teachers started exam preparation in the third term while several teachers did so at earlier points even at the beginning of the school year. Intense exam preparation took place outside regular hours but some teachers did so during ordinary teaching". Manjarrés (2012: 13-14) in her case study identified that the Foreign Language Test of the State Examinations in Colombia had noticeable and a rather strong impact at administrative, logistic and planning level, the same is not felt inside the classroom. According to the empirical data she collected the test did not determine everything that happened in the class.

Xiao (2014: 1174) while studying the washback effect of College English Test (CET) underlines the fact that intensity of washback varies from person to person. The author also notices that "the students use test management and test-wiseness strategies more frequently, and meta-cognitive and cognitive strategies less frequently", echoing, in this way, the findings of Watanabe (1992) that an exam may promote strategy use. The conclusion of the author is that "CET does affect test-taking strategy use, but not that intensively. It only moderately promotes cognitive strategy use and weakly promotes test management and test-wiseness strategy use".

1.2. Objective

This paper will focus on washback intensity and the way such intensity affects teaching and learning in Albanian high schools.

1.3. Research question

What is the intensity of SME washback in Albanian high schools and what are the impacts of this intensity on teaching and learning?

2. Methodology

2.1. Method of analysis

We used a combined research method for this paper, i.e. elements of both quantitative and qualitative methods using multi-sites contexts combined with several data collection techniques mainly through questionnaires. We processed the data collected from the questionnaires through a combination of both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis.

2.2. Population

A total number of 401 students and 141 teachers from 50 high schools throughout the country gave their opinion through questionnaires on the washback intensity of SME.

2.3. Instruments

Instruments used for this paper were two questionnaires (one for teachers and one for students). We designed them mainly on the techniques of ranking scales and sliding scales (multiple-choice, categorical, Likert scale etc.).

3. Findings and discussion

The focus of the research on the washback intensity of SME in our case was in two aspects: intensity in *content* and in *time*. Several questions addressed to teachers and students deal with the intensity of SME washback in *content*. There is a general approach that the introduction of SME has intensified its effect on content. However, to see if this approach is true we tried to get teachers' and students' opinion.

3.1. Teachers' opinion on washback intensity of SME in content

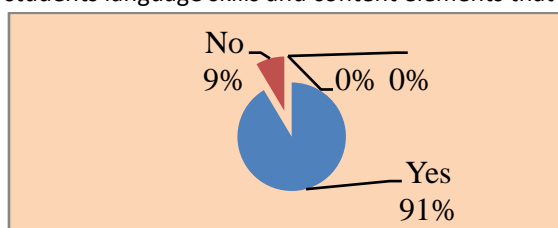**Question:** Do you teach your students language skills and content elements that are part of SME?

Figure 3.1.1: Teachers' opinion on whether they teach language skills and content elements that are part of SME.

Question: Would you do this unless SME was not introduced?
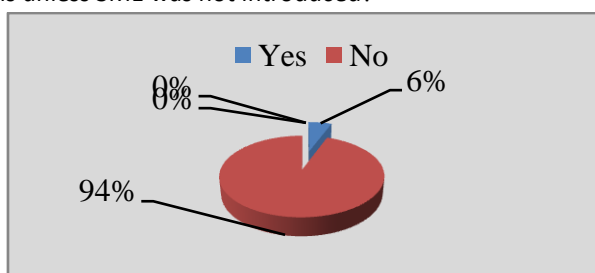

Figure 3.1.2: Teachers' opinion whether they would teach language skills and content elements that are part of SME unless this test was introduced.

Question: Are you under students' pressure to teach them language skills and content elements that are part of SME?
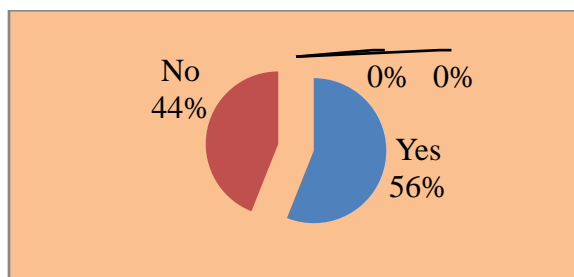

Figure 3.1.3: Teachers' opinion whether they are under students' pressure to teach them language skills and content elements that are part of SME.

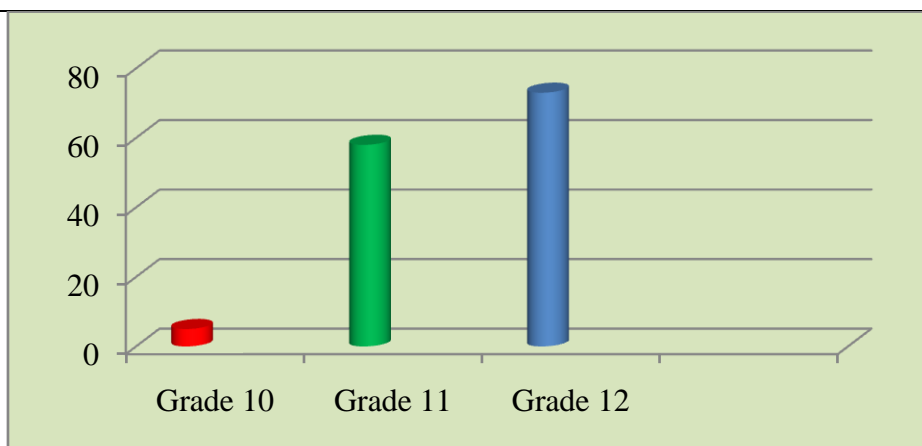**Question:** If the answer is YES when is this pressure stronger?

Figure 3.1.4: Teachers' opinion on the intensity of students' pressure to teach them language skills and content elements that are part of SME.

Question: What additional work has SME required from you as a teacher? Please answer by ticking the aspect according to this scale: 1=totally disagree, 2=disagree, 3=neutral, 4=agree, 5=totally agree.

Table 1: Intensity of washback on some teaching aspects

Aspects influenced	Totally disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Totally agree
More preparation for the lesson.	-	-	5	31	105
More work on the preparation of teaching materials.	-	6	-	96	39
More activities focused on SME.	-	-	11	65	65
Use of new teaching methods.	-	-	43	47	51

3.2. Students' opinion on washback intensity of SME in content

One of the purposes of this paper was to reveal how students feel the washback intensity of SME in *content*. Therefore, some questions in their questionnaire addressed this issue.

Question: Do you think that your English teacher pays more attention during the lesson to language skills, tasks and exercises that prepare you for SME?
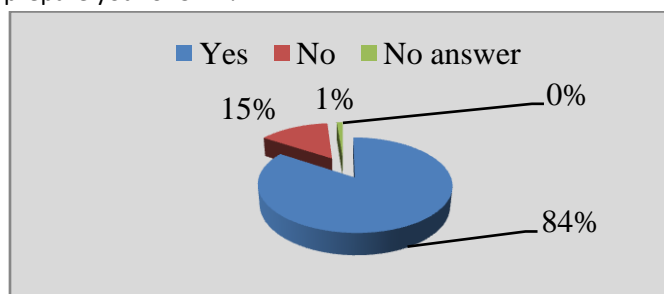

Figure 3.2.1: Students opinion whether their English teacher pays more attention during the lesson to language skills, tasks and exercises that prepare them for SME.

Question: What kinds of exercises does your teacher do most during the English classes? Tick the right answer for you.

Table 3.2.1: Kinds of exercises teachers do most during English classes.

Nr.	Kinds of exercises	Answers
1	Multiple choice	130
2	Answer the questions to a text	144
3	Gap filling	179
4	Grammar exercises	259
5	Matching exercises	84
8	True/False exercises	149
7	Correct the information	94
8	Letter/E-mail/essay writing	228

Note: Empirical data are expressed in number of answers as students could tick more than one kind of exercise.

Another aspect which we intended to inquire about was the washback intensity of SME on quizzes and tests conducted by the teachers during the school year.

Question: Do you think that quizzes and tests designed by your teacher during the school year are tailored according to SME format?

Figure 3.2.2: Students' opinion on the influence of SME on class quizzes and tests.

Question: How do you prepare for SME? (Tick the following ways that you yourself use).

Table 3.2.2: The way students prepare for SME.

Nr.	Ways used to prepare for SME	Nr. of answers
1	Do kinds of exercises used in SME during the English lesson.	234
2	Teacher designs a special timetable.	111
3	Have old SME versions from the past years in class.	136
4	Do different exercises prepared by teachers mocking SME exercises.	185
5	Work independently by downloading version SME from the past years.	127
6	Attend private courses organized by my teacher.	37
7	Attend private courses organized by different centers out of school.	126
8	Do not make any special preparation.	21

Note: The empirical data are expressed in number of answers as students could tick more than one kind of exercise.

3.3. Washback intensity of SME in time

Shih 2007 (in Mizutani 2009: 30-32) while offering a model for the study of washback pointed out that washback is produced in time. The author expressed this in a graphical way through a linear vector as follows:

It is true that washback is produced in time but it does not follow a uniform course. Being a very complex phenomenon its intensity varies in time. In the case of SME in Albanian schools, for instance, the view is different. Some of the questions in teachers' questionnaire addressed this issue to collect empirical data regarding washback intensity in time.

Regarding the time allocated for students' preparation for SME we asked the following question:

Question: How much time do you spend with the preparation of students for SME?
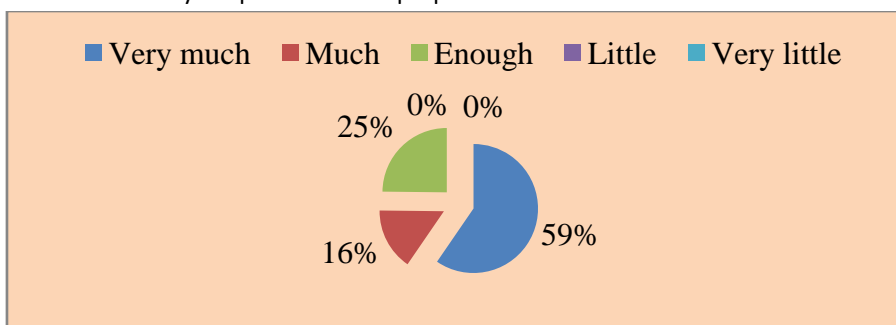

Figure 3.3.1: Time spent by teachers to prepare students for SME.

Replies given to another question that is related with the use of materials for the preparation of students for SME support the above data. In order to create an idea about the time the use of such materials is more intense we addressed the following question:

Question: Do you use materials for the preparation of students for SME more with the approach of the test?
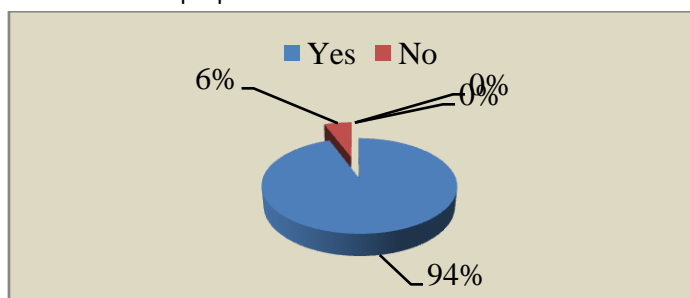

Figure 3.3.2: How do teachers use materials for the preparation of students for SME in time terms?

Data collected by the above question are supported by the Students' responses given to the question "When does the preparation work for SME start?" support the data collected by the above question.

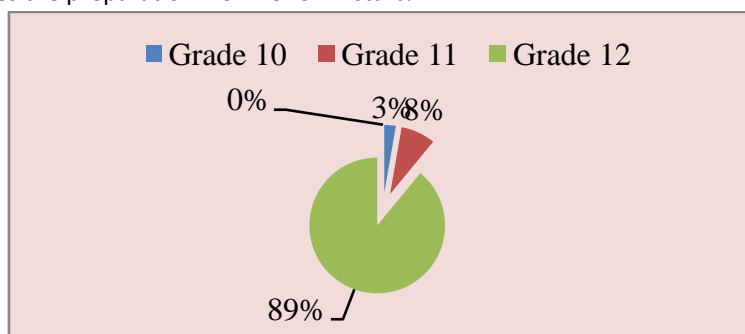**Question:** When does the preparation work for SME start?

Figure 3.3.3: Students' opinion on the time their preparation for SME starts.

4. Conclusions

SME has produced positive and negative washback on teaching and learning. The introduction of this test has intensified teachers and students' work. The intensity of SME washback appears in two main variables: *in content* and *in time*.

Data collected from the empirical study clearly show that the introduction of SME has influenced the content taught during the English classes. They indicate that among 141 teachers 128 of them have shifted teaching on the content that might be part of SME. This conclusion becomes more evident by teachers' responses to the question "Would you do this unless SME was not introduced?" Out of 141 teachers 133 of them stated that they would not focus their teaching on language skills and content elements that are part of SME if this examination was not introduced.

Though students' pressure on teachers to teach them mainly the language skills and content elements that might be part of SME, as admitted by teachers, is not so strong, again it should be noted that among 141

teachers 79 think that they are under this kind of pressure and 62 responded that they do not experience such pressure. The fact that 56% of the teachers think they suffer this pressure has impact on their teaching by compelling them to teach what SME tests.

Students' responses to the question "Do you think that your English teacher pays more attention during the lesson to language skills, tasks and exercises that prepare you for SME?" indicate that among 401 students 338 of them agree, 58 disagree and only 4 refused to answer. It is evident that during English lessons teachers mostly focus on language skills, tasks and exercises that prepare students for SME. This has produced negative washback on the implemented curriculum by narrowing it. Teachers mainly tailor their teaching according to SME framework.

Another aspect where this paper focused was how SME has influenced the kinds of exercises and tasks teachers prepare for English lessons. Compiling a list of tasks and exercises that are part of the recent SME versions and asking students to tick which of them teachers use mostly made it possible to have a clearer picture on what really happens. Before the introduction of SME teachers did not frequently use exercises like: Letter/E-mail/essay writing, multiple choice, correct information and gap filling, Their intense use is related with the introduction of SME. On one hand, SME has enriched the lesson with some new techniques for class activities, but on the other hand focusing on types of exercises that better prepare students for the test avoids some other techniques and exercises which are very helpful for students' language proficiency like: speaking activities through discussions, descriptions, debates, pair work, group work, stating and supporting opinion etc.

We also examined washback intensity on content in class tests and quizzes that teachers prepare and use during the school year. Empirical data show that there is no doubt that SME has produced washback in this teaching aspect as well. Among 401 students asked to give their opinion whether quizzes and tests designed by their teachers during the school year are tailored according to SME format 372 state that teachers design class tests and quizzes by mocking SME; 26 share the opinion that teachers do not mock SME in designing such tests and quizzes while 4 students refused to answer. In terms of intensity it should be noted that there is a great increase in the number of tasks and exercises that 'mock' SME. This tendency again narrows the implemented curriculum by avoiding some other assessment techniques through quizzes and periodic tests like: Cloze tests, vocabulary tests, reformulation, prediction, writing prompts etc.

Another teaching aspect that shows the intensity of SME washback on content is the ways teachers use to prepare their students for SME. Introduction of this examination has intensified students' work to prepare for this test. Data collected from a list of possible ways used by students to prepare for SME create this picture: Do kinds of exercises used in SME during the English lesson with 234 ticks; do different exercises prepared by teachers mocking SME exercises with 185 ticks; have old SME versions from the past years in class with 136 ticks; work independently by downloading SME versions from the past years with 127 ticks and; attend private courses organized by different centers out of school with 126 ticks. Among these ways of preparation those conducted in English classes are dominant. This clearly strengthens the opinion of many washback scholars that most of washback is produced within the classroom. From intensity point of view the data show that there is an intensification of preparation activities within class, and with the approaching of the test this intensity increases.

In respect to washback intensity of SME in time the case of Albanian high schools shows that Shih's vector of time does not appear in a linear form. It has three segments: one with sparse dashes, one with dense dashes and one with a line which express the intensity of SME washback in every school grade. Empirical data from the students support this finding. 89% of them think that preparation for SME starts in grade 12, 8% think it starts in grade 11 and only 3% think it starts in grade 10. Regarding the time allocated for the preparation of students for SME the data collected from teachers prove that 59% of them spend 'very much' time, 16% spend 'much' ˙ time and 25% spend "enough' time. These data imply that most of the teachers allocate a lot of time for preparation of students for SME. Apart from this, the intensity of materials used for SME preparation is stronger with the approach of the test as expressed by 94% of the teachers.

Thus, in this case the time vector introduced by Shih appears in a different way. It has three segments: one with sparse dashes, one with dense dashes and one with a line, as illustrated in the following figure:

This vector expresses how intensity changes from grade to grade. Sparse dashes show that in grade 10 washback intensity of SME is weak, in grade 11 it becomes stronger and in grade 12 it is very strong.

In a nutshell, washback intensity of SME expresses in two main teaching and learning aspects of Albanian high schools: *in content* and *in time.* This washback has positive and negative values as regards to content and negative values as regards time. Positive values show that teachers and students have intensified their work for knowledge acquiring, while negative values show that teachers mainly tailor their teaching activities by mocking SME and with the approach of the test washback intensity in time increases by making SME as a "locomotive" of the teaching and learning process which results in curriculum narrowing.

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