

## TEST WASHBACK AND EFL PEDAGOGY IN VIETNAMESE UNIVERSITIES

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### ABSTRACT

Washback- the influence of assessment on teaching and learning- plays a central role in shaping English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Vietnamese higher education. This review adopts a narrative approach to examine: (1) the impact of high-stakes tests on teaching, (2) perceptions of teachers and students, and (3) strategies to reduce negative washback. The findings show that test effects are complex and context-dependent: well-aligned exams can support learning, while poorly integrated ones may narrow instruction and weaken communicative competence. Key challenges include tensions between test preparation and communicative teaching, insufficient integration of productive skills, limited teacher assessment literacy, neglect of student voices, and the lack of longitudinal research. The review proposes a conceptual model linking test design, teacher agency, institutional management, and policy pressures. Strategies highlighted include teacher professional development, involvement in test design, embedding productive skills in assessment, and stronger collaboration among universities, policymakers, and researchers.

**Keywords:** *washback, high-stakes testing, assessment literacy, communicative teaching.*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Testing plays a pivotal role in shaping instructional practices in higher education. As universities worldwide increasingly rely on standardized assessments to measure learning outcomes, ensure quality assurance, and maintain accountability, the influence of these tests on classroom teaching has intensified. Among the most prominent manifestations of this influence is test washback- the effect assessments have on teaching methods, learning strategies, and curriculum design.

In EFL teaching, where communicative competence and holistic skill development are central goals, test washback is particularly pronounced. In Vietnam, English instruction is closely aligned with standardized proficiency tests such as IELTS, TOEIC, and the Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency (VSTEP). Registrations for international exams surged to around 47,000 in 2023 (Vietnam National Institute of Educational Sciences & National Foreign Language Project, 2024), while VSTEP has gained traction nationally, with over 13,000 administrations between 2015 and 2017 (Ngo, 2022). These trends reflect growing institutional and governmental emphasis on standardized testing as benchmarks for graduation, placement, and program evaluation, exerting substantial influence on curriculum design and teaching practices.

In Vietnamese universities, the challenge extends beyond aligning curricula with exam content; it involves negotiating tensions between

high-stakes exam preparation and communicative, student-centered instruction. Educators often struggle to balance exam readiness with fostering transferable language skills. As a result, exploring washback is critical for educational reform, language policy, and instructional innovation in Vietnam's higher education landscape.

Despite a growing body of research, the evidence base has notable gaps. Many studies rely on small or institution-specific samples, limiting generalizability. Others adopt short-term designs, leaving the evolution of teaching practices underexplored. Research often privileges teachers' perspectives while overlooking student experiences, and few studies examine interventions, leaving uncertainty about which strategies mitigate negative washback effectively. These gaps highlight the need for a more balanced and critical synthesis of evidence.

This review addresses these gaps by synthesizing existing literature to examine the influence of high-stakes English tests on teaching practices in Vietnam and to identify effective approaches. Recognizing that washback can be both positive and negative, it adopts a balanced perspective that integrates empirical findings and theoretical insights. The scope is delimited to Vietnamese higher education, with a focus on EFL lecturers, while drawing on international perspectives to situate findings within wider assessment-driven contexts.

The review is guided by three questions:

1) How do high-stakes English tests influence

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classroom teaching in Vietnamese universities over time?

2) How do teachers and students perceive both positive and negative washback effects?

3) Which strategies or policies effectively reduce negative washback and promote meaningful learning?

By situating the discussion within Vietnam's higher education context and aligning with international debates, this review aims to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Ultimately, it seeks to inform both pedagogical and policy decisions that support more effective and equitable English language education.

## 2. CONTENTS

This review follows a narrative synthesis approach, drawing on both international and Vietnamese studies on test washback in higher education. Sources were identified through database searches using key terms such as *washback*, *testing effects*, *English language teaching*, *higher education*, *Vietnam*, and *assessment reform*. Studies were screened for relevance to the Vietnamese university context, with particular attention to those involving EFL instruction and standardized assessments (IELTS, TOEIC, TOEFL, and VSTEP).

Beyond mapping the existing knowledge base, the review also critically evaluates methodological limitations that have constrained prior scholarship. Specifically, three gaps recur across the literature: the absence of longitudinal evidence tracing how teaching evolves over time; the lack of systematic integration of student perspectives alongside those of teachers; and the scarcity of intervention-focused studies that test solutions rather than merely describe problems. These gaps informed both the selection of studies and the organization of the subsequent subsections (2.1–2.6), where the literature is synthesized and critiqued with these challenges in view.

### 2.1. Conceptualizing washback in language education

Research on washback in language education has evolved from a narrow focus on test outcomes to a more complex recognition of how assessment permeates classroom life. Early product-oriented perspectives foregrounded the ways in which high-stakes tests shape curricula, instructional goals, and measurable learning outcomes. Later process-oriented perspectives shifted attention to the dynamic, ongoing adaptations that teachers and learners make in response to exam requirements (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Bailey, 1996;

Cheng, 1997).

Classic studies illustrate this duality, showing that washback is rarely unidirectional. Positive washback can manifest through clearer curricular alignment, heightened learner motivation, or the prioritization of skills deemed valuable for academic and professional advancement. At the same time, negative washback may constrain pedagogy by encouraging teaching to the test, narrowing content coverage, and fostering reliance on rote memorization rather than communicative competence (Spratt, 2005; Watanabe, 2004).

Yet these foundational theories are often framed within relatively stable educational environments and tend to capture only snapshots of classroom behavior. They overlook how teacher practices and learner strategies evolve under long-term exposure to testing regimes. This gap is significant in contexts such as Vietnam, where reforms are incremental and shifts in pedagogy may only emerge after years of repeated exam cycles (Wall & Horak, 2006; Pham, 2020).

Another limitation lies in the distribution of attention across actors. Although conceptual frameworks stress the reciprocity between teaching and learning (Green, 2007; Shih, 2009), empirical research continues to privilege teacher behaviors, curriculum choices, and policy pressures, while giving comparatively less weight to learners' voices. The lived experiences of students or how they negotiate exam demands, balance exam preparation with communicative needs, and develop agency in the face of testing pressures remain underexplored (Tsagari & Cheng, 2017).

Finally, while most models succeed in describing the mechanics of washback, they often stop short of prescribing concrete interventions. This descriptive orientation provides limited guidance on how pedagogical innovations such as integrated skill instruction, formative assessment, or collaborative curriculum design might actively reshape the nature of washback and mitigate its more restrictive effects (Nguyen, 2017; Watanabe, 2004). What is still needed is a model or framework that links conceptual clarity with actionable strategies, enabling educators to move from diagnosing the effects of tests to transforming them in practice.

### 2.2. Global evidence on washback effects

International scholarship on washback has revealed a striking diversity of effects across educational systems, reflecting both the intensity of test use and the local pedagogical cultures in which they are embedded. In East Asian contexts such as China and South Korea, for instance, research

consistently reports an intensified focus on test-taking strategies, memorization, and examination techniques (Cheng & Curtis, 2004; Qi, 2007; Xie & Andrews, 2013). By contrast, studies from several European contexts present more mixed findings, suggesting that the same assessments may yield more modest shifts in classroom practice, often moderated by pre-existing curricular traditions or teachers' professional autonomy (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Green, 2007). Such comparative insights stress the fact that washback is not monolithic but highly contingent on institutional and cultural conditions.

Nevertheless, the methodological approaches underlying much of this international research remain constrained. A large proportion of studies rely on cross-sectional surveys or short-term classroom observations, typically spanning a single semester or examination cycle (Shih, 2009). While these designs capture immediate responses to testing demands, they rarely illuminate the longer-term processes of adaptation, which means how teachers gradually reshape materials, experiment with new instructional techniques, or recalibrate classroom priorities across multiple cohorts of learners. This temporal limitation leaves the cumulative effects of high-stakes testing underexplored, especially in contexts where educational reforms unfold incrementally and sustained test pressure interacts with broader institutional change.

In addition, although global studies frequently invoke student-related factors such as motivation, anxiety, and self-regulation (Pan, 2009; Tsagari & Cheng, 2017), relatively few systematically incorporate student perspectives as primary data. The result is an asymmetry: teacher practices and institutional responses are documented in rich detail, while learners' lived experiences of test-driven education remain underrepresented. This imbalance narrows our understanding of how washback is negotiated at the classroom level, where student agency and perception play a critical role in shaping learning trajectories.

Finally, intervention-oriented research, which attempts to move beyond description to test possible pedagogical remedies, remains limited in scope and inconclusive in its outcomes. For example, efforts to introduce task-based instruction or communicative approaches as a counterweight to rote, test-driven pedagogy have shown promise in theory but often encounter resistance in practice, leading to uneven or short-lived results (Watanabe, 2004; Zhan & Andrews, 2014). The scarcity of robust intervention studies highlights a persistent

gap between theoretical models of washback and actionable strategies that can meaningfully transform classroom practice.

Taken together, this global evidence suggests that while the phenomenon of washback is well recognized, its mechanisms and consequences are far from fully understood. For Vietnam, the implication is clear- future research must move beyond replication of international findings and instead adopt designs that address these methodological blind spots, i.e., longitudinal investigations, balanced attention to both teacher and student voices, and carefully designed interventions that test how washback can be reshaped rather than merely described.

### ***2.3. Washback research in Asian higher education***

Within Asian higher education, the phenomenon of washback is particularly pronounced due to the central role of high-stakes national examinations that often determine academic mobility, professional certification, and even long-term career opportunities (Cheng, 2008; Choi, 2008). Evidence from China, Japan, and Korea highlights challenges strikingly similar to those encountered in Vietnam: educators strive to reconcile the demands of communicative pedagogy with the pressures of examination-driven curricula (Lee, 2016; Qi, 2007; Watanabe, 1996). This tension is not only pedagogical but also institutional, shaping how universities allocate resources, design syllabi, and evaluate teaching quality.

Despite the extensive scholarship emerging from these contexts, methodological limitations remain. Much of the existing work is confined to single-year case studies or short-term classroom observations (Cheng et al., 2015), which, while valuable, provide only a snapshot of broader dynamics. Longitudinal analyses that track teacher adaptation across successive reforms are rare, leaving unresolved questions about whether washback effects dissipate, intensify, or evolve over time. Moreover, although student stress, motivation, and affective responses are often cited (Inbar-Lourie & Shohamy, 2009), systematic attempts to integrate learner perspectives with teacher narratives are minimal. This omission risks producing a one-sided understanding of washback, where policy and pedagogy are foregrounded but student agency remains obscured.

Intervention-oriented research, though present, also reflects these constraints. Studies that explore curricular alternatives, such as the adoption of innovative assessment practices in Japanese

universities (Sasaki, 2009), provide useful illustrations of how washback might be moderated. Yet these efforts tend to remain localized, small in scale, and inconclusive in their broader applicability.

#### **2.4. Washback studies in Vietnam: Scope and trends**

Over the past two decades, Vietnam has witnessed a steady expansion of scholarship on washback, paralleling the rising influence of globalized proficiency tests such as IELTS and TOEIC, as well as the domestically developed VSTEP (Dang et al., 2013; Nguyen, 2017; Pham, 2020). Empirical studies consistently report similar patterns: teachers narrowing their pedagogical focus to test-related skills, the corresponding decline in communicative classroom activities, and the rapid growth of commercial test preparation industries (Nguyen, 2017; Nguyen & Gu, 2020). These findings have provided an important evidence base for policymakers concerned with the unintended consequences of assessment reforms.

Yet Vietnamese research also reveals clear limitations. A dominant reliance on cross-sectional surveys and small-scale classroom observations constrains the ability to capture shifts in practice across multiple cohorts or phases of reform (Gap 1). This methodological narrowing reduces insight into the longer-term trajectories of teacher adaptation and institutional response. Similarly, while teachers' perspectives have been extensively documented, students' experiences remain comparatively underexplored even though learners are the most directly affected by washback pressures (Nguyen, 2019; Vu & Burns, 2014). The limited representation of student voices produces an incomplete account of how washback is actually perceived, negotiated, or resisted (Gap 2).

Finally, intervention-focused studies remain particularly scarce. Only a handful of projects have attempted to evaluate the impact of redesigned syllabi, alternative instructional materials, or incentive-based policy measures (Pham & Renshaw, 2015; Ngo, 2022). Without such evidence, it is difficult for decision-makers to determine which strategies may effectively mitigate negative washback while still maintaining assessment standards (Gap 3). Collectively, these gaps highlight the urgent need for Vietnamese research to adopt more longitudinal, student-inclusive, and intervention-driven designs, thereby contributing more substantively to both local policy debates and global scholarship.

#### **2.5. Teachers' perspectives on test washback in Vietnam**

Research into teachers' experiences with high-stakes language testing in Vietnam has consistently highlighted the intensifying pressure to "teach to the test," whereby instruction becomes narrowly tailored to mirror exam formats and item types (Nguyen, 2019; Phan, 2017). While this alignment is often framed as a pragmatic necessity, it raises enduring concerns about the erosion of broader pedagogical aims, such as fostering communicative competence or critical thinking. The literature reveals valuable insights into teacher cognition, coping strategies, and the subtle ways in which instructors negotiate institutional expectations with their own pedagogical beliefs. However, many of these studies rely on small, convenience-based samples and single-timepoint interviews. As a result, they tend to offer only a snapshot of practice rather than capturing the longitudinal evolution of how teachers adapt across successive reforms, shifting institutional demands, or changing cohorts of students (Nguyen & Gu, 2020). This methodological limitation marks the first gap in the field, as the dynamic processes of adjustment remain underexplored.

Moreover, although teachers' voices provide indispensable accounts of the professional and psychological toll of exam-oriented teaching, the overwhelming emphasis on teacher narratives creates a skewed understanding of washback. Student perspectives, i.e., the experiences of those most directly subject to test-driven pedagogical practices, are far less systematically integrated. Existing research mentions issues such as heightened stress, reduced intrinsic motivation, and disengagement from communicative learning opportunities (Vu & Burns, 2014), yet these insights are often anecdotal or peripheral. Without sustained and systematic incorporation of student perspectives, scholarship risks presenting an incomplete, teacher-centric picture of washback, leaving unanswered questions about how learners perceive, negotiate, or resist exam-driven pressures. This represents the second gap in the Vietnamese literature.

Finally, while teachers themselves often suggest practical solutions to mitigate negative washback, such as embedding communicative tasks within exam preparation lessons, diversifying assessment modes, or redesigning curricular materials, there is little empirical evidence testing the viability or impact of these strategies (Pham & Renshaw, 2015). This creates a persistent gap between proposed remedies and demonstrated effectiveness. Intervention studies that trial teacher-led

innovations or policy-driven reforms in real classroom contexts remain scarce, leaving both practitioners and policymakers with limited guidance on what actually works in alleviating harmful forms of washback. Bridging this third gap requires moving beyond descriptive accounts toward more rigorous, evidence-based evaluation of interventions.

**2.6. Teachers’ perspectives on test washback in Vietnam**

Compared with teachers, students’ voices remain markedly underrepresented in the Vietnamese washback literature. Where learner perspectives are included, findings consistently point to heightened test-related anxiety, diminished motivation for communicative learning, and an overemphasis on exam-taking strategies (Dang, Nguyen, & Le, 2013; Nguyen, 2019). However, most of these investigations rely on small-scale, cross-sectional survey designs, producing only static snapshots of learner perceptions rather than capturing how attitudes and strategies evolve over time (Vu & Burns, 2014). Longitudinal evidence tracing developmental trajectories across multiple years of study or in response to shifts in assessment policy is virtually absent, limiting understanding of how washback processes unfold in students’ learning journeys.

Moreover, although student reports provide a vital counterbalance to teacher narratives, their scarcity has created a systematic imbalance in the evidence base. Current scholarship disproportionately privileges teachers’ perspectives, thereby obscuring the full complexity of washback as a multi-stakeholder phenomenon (Nguyen & Gu, 2020). Without adequate representation of learners, the literature risks overstating teacher-centered interpretations while underestimating the extent to which students’ lived experiences shape, resist, or amplify the effects of testing.

Finally, there is an almost complete lack of intervention-based research that directly involves students such as structured study-skills training, peer collaboration schemes, or alternative feedback mechanisms. This gap leaves open critical questions about which pedagogical or institutional strategies may effectively mitigate negative washback and foster more positive orientations toward learning in test-driven contexts (Ngo, 2022). Addressing this issue would not only help balance existing evidence but also generate actionable insights into how students can be better supported under exam-oriented educational conditions.

Taken together, the literature reviewed in Sections 2.1–2.6 confirms that language tests exert substantial influence on teaching and learning in Vietnam. Tests frequently reinforce exam-focused instruction and shape curriculum priorities, yet three critical blind spots persist: (1) the dominance of small-scale, cross-sectional studies that limit understanding of longitudinal dynamics; (2) the imbalance created by privileging teachers’ perspectives while underrepresenting students’ voices; and (3) the scarcity of intervention-based research capable of demonstrating strategies that might alleviate negative washback. These limitations underscore the need for a more holistic framework that systematically incorporates multiple stakeholders and explicitly traces the mechanisms through which washback unfolds.

In response, the present review proposes a conceptual model positioning washback at the intersection of teacher agency, institutional policy, assessment design, and broader socio-economic forces. The model outlines mediating mechanisms and potential outcomes, offering a structured approach to interpret current findings and guide future empirical inquiry (Table 1).

**Table 1. Conceptual Model of Test Washback in Vietnamese Higher Education**

Washback Factors	Mediating Mechanisms	Educational Outcomes
High-stakes national exams (e.g., graduation, proficiency tests)	Teacher agency (adaptation, resistance, innovation)	Narrowing of curriculum/ overemphasis on test-taking strategies
Institutional assessment policies and resource allocation	Institutional practices (support, monitoring, professional development)	Improved alignment (or misalignment) between teaching and assessment
Test format and content focus (receptive vs. productive skills)	Student perceptions and learning strategies	Uneven skill development (e.g., strong reading/listening but weak speaking/writing)
External pressures (policy mandates, job market demands, accountability frameworks)	Policy implementation capacity (training, transparency, stakeholder involvement)	Positive washback (holistic skill growth, communicative competence) or negative washback (rote learning, exam-driven teaching)

In sum, while the phenomenon of washback in Vietnam is well established, the existing evidence base remains fragmented. The conceptual model outlined above hopefully offers a framework for integrating these disparate findings, clarifying persistent gaps, and charting directions for more balanced, intervention-oriented research that can inform both pedagogy and policy.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Test washback remains both a challenge and an opportunity for improving EFL instruction in Vietnamese higher education. High-stakes exams exert a pervasive but uneven influence, mediated by teacher agency, institutional priorities, and policy frameworks. While tests can provide focus and motivation, they also risk narrowing instruction and marginalizing communicative competence.

This review addressed three guiding questions. First, high-stakes English tests shape teaching practices in both enabling and constraining ways: they create clear learning targets but often reduce instruction to test-taking strategies. Second,

teachers and students perceive washback ambivalently—teachers see both structure and misalignment, while students frequently equate learning with exam performance. Third, strategies to foster positive washback include sustained professional development to build assessment literacy, teacher involvement in test reform, integration of productive skills into national exams, and stronger collaboration among policymakers, universities, and researchers.

These findings suggest that washback is not inherently negative but contingent on assessment design and implementation. By aligning curricular goals with testing practices and empowering teachers as reform agents, washback can shift from a constraint to a catalyst for more communicative and equitable EFL pedagogy. Future research should prioritize longitudinal and intervention-based studies, especially in under-resourced institutions, and systematically integrate student perspectives to build a fuller evidence base for sustainable reform.

## TÁC ĐỘNG NGƯỢC CỦA KIỂM TRA ĐÁNH GIÁ ĐẾN VIỆC DẠY HỌC TIẾNG ANH TRONG CÁC TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC VIỆT NAM

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### TÓM TẮT

Tác động ngược của kiểm tra đánh giá - tức ảnh hưởng của kiểm tra đánh giá đối với dạy và học - giữ vai trò then chốt trong việc định hình giảng dạy tiếng Anh như ngoại ngữ ở bậc đại học tại Việt Nam. Bài viết này sử dụng phương pháp tổng quan tường thuật để tìm hiểu: (1) tác động của các bài thi mang tính quyết định đối với giảng dạy, (2) nhận thức của giảng viên và sinh viên, và (3) các chiến lược nhằm giảm thiểu tác động tiêu cực của bài thi mang tính quyết định. Kết quả cho thấy ảnh hưởng của các bài thi mang tính quyết định khá phức tạp và phụ thuộc bối cảnh: nếu thiết kế phù hợp, bài thi có thể hỗ trợ học tập; ngược lại, bài thi không lồng ghép tốt các kỹ năng dễ làm thu hẹp nội dung giảng dạy và giảm năng lực giao tiếp của người học. Những thách thức chính gồm mâu thuẫn giữa nhu cầu luyện thi và giảng dạy theo định hướng giao tiếp, thiếu tích hợp kỹ năng sản sinh khi đánh giá, hạn chế về năng lực đánh giá của giảng viên, ít chú trọng tiếng nói sinh viên và thiếu nghiên cứu dài hạn về tác động ngược. Bài viết đề xuất mô hình khái niệm liên kết thiết kế đề thi, vai trò giảng viên, quản lý cơ sở và áp lực chính sách, đồng thời nhấn mạnh các chiến lược: bồi dưỡng giảng viên, tham gia thiết kế đề thi, tích hợp kỹ năng sản sinh, và tăng cường hợp tác ba bên giữa nhà trường, nhà hoạch định chính sách và nhà nghiên cứu.

**Từ khóa:** tác động ngược, bài thi quyết định, năng lực đánh giá, giảng dạy theo định hướng giao tiếp.

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