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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Washback Effects of the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology (MSRT) Test on Iranian Ph.D. Candidates' English Language Learning Skills
Running Title: Washback Effects of the Ministry of MDRT test

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This explanatory sequential mixed-method study was aimed to investigate the washback effect of a local English Proficiency Exam (the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology Test (MSRT)) on Iranian Ph.D. candidates' English language learning skills. The study also examined the changes Iranian Ph.D. candidates perceive as essential to make the MSRT module implementation more useful for English learning. To this end, a sample of 150 Ph.D. candidates with differences in gender, age, and major were invited from Islamic Azad universities of Shiraz and Marvdasht to complete a questionnaire designed in terms of MSRT washback. The participants were chosen through a combination of stratified and convenience sampling methods. Furthermore, a sample of 20 PhD candidates from the same population was selected based on purposeful sampling and participated in the semi-structured interview sessions. The results of the data analysis represented some positive and negative washback effects on MSRT. Moreover, the participants suggested some recommendations on necessary changes and alterations for the MSRT test to facilitate university English learning further. Their feedback was in line with their viewpoints on why MSRT preparation had not satisfactorily prepared them to manage university workloads.

Keywords: High-stakes tests, Language testing, Learning skills, MSRT test, Washback effect

Introduction

Assessment in academic settings is essential to students' growth. It is also employed to decide whether a learner is prepared to advance to the following grade (Borghouts et al., 2017; Zakeri et al., 2018). Tests like measurement tools are used for various reasons in the expansive field of assessment (Imlig & Ender, 2018). However, the emergence of tests in the education sector results in some intentional or unintentional modifications to the curriculum, particularly in teaching and learning methods and the importance placed on practicing receptive and productive language learning skills (Damankesh & Babaii, 2015). Testing's impact on instruction and learning is known as "the washback effect" when evaluating languages (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Cheng & Curtis, 2012). In fact, washback means the consequences that a test may have on persons, guidelines and procedures, inside the classroom, the institution, the school organization, or society as a whole, according to Wall (1997, p. 291). Tests can also limit what students learn by forcing them to focus primarily on the portions of the curriculum that are predicted to be included on the test (Chapelle, 2020) or on the language acquisition abilities that they find difficult to apply to following future instructions.

Many scholars have conducted empirical studies to understand better the term and the engagement with its related ideas to determine the impact of various tests, especially high-stakes tests, on aims and objectives, teaching and learning, instructors and students, materials, and the entire curriculum. This is due to washback's significant role in language testing (Damankesh & Babaii, 2015; Zhang & Bournot-Trites, 2021). There have been numerous research examining the impact of tests on teachers' instruction (Binnahedh, 2022; Dammak et al., 2022; Qi, 2004), but few exploratory research has been conducted on the impact of tests on students (Pan & Newfield, 2012). Although students are the primary stakeholders in any assessment innovation (Xie & Andrews, 2013), no study has been conducted to explore the washback effect of high-stakes exams like the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology (MSRT) test on Iranian Ph.D. candidates' learning skills. This test is considered a high-stake test as the decisions made based on the obtained scores determine the students' future.

The washback effect is particularly relevant regarding high-stakes tests, such as university entrance exams (de la Fuente Fernández & Calvo Pascual, 2022). MSRT test, prepared for and taken for many Ph.D. candidates in Iran, is likely to bring degrees of washback both at micro and macro levels. As a high-stake test, MSRT test tends to wield a noticeable impact on language learning methods that Iranian Ph.D. candidates might apply. However, the issue of Ph.D. candidates' insight into the washback of the MSRT test module implementation on English learning is untouched. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, up to the present time, it appears that limited studies have been accomplished in this field to investigate washback to the learners from the MSRT test in the Iranian EFL context. The present study was intended to investigate the effect a high-stake test like MSRT test can have on Ph.D. candidates' language learning skills. To achieve this end, the following research questions were formulated:

RQ1: How do Iranian Ph.D. candidates view the washback effect of the MSRT module implementation on English learning?

RQ2: What changes do Iranian Ph.D. candidates perceive as essential to make the MSRT module implementation more useful for English learning?

Literature review

The Concept of Washback

In academic learning, assessment is one of the most frequently discussed topics and is crucial to learning a second or foreign language (Izadpanh & Abdollahi, 2021). As is evident from the transparent crystal, testing is a related category of assessment that is integrated into all teaching and learning processes. Thus, it is generally accepted that testing and assessments impact teaching and learning in applied linguistics and the teaching of second or foreign languages. This effect is known as "washback" (Saglam & Farhady, 2019). On the other hand, in general, washback refers to the impacts of an assessment on both training and learning in an educational setting (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Spolsky (1994, p. 2) views backwash as a concept that "deals with the unforeseen side-effects of testing and not to the intended effects when the primary goal of the examination is the control of curricula". Most scientific study journals regularly use the terms washback degree and positive vs. negative washback. Washback's degree varies depending on the context of the test, the language being studied, the intended outcome, the test's structure, and the capabilities being tested (Gebril, 2018; Sumera et al., 2015).

In the past decades, washback research has looked at whether the phenomenon occurs in educational settings, which led to classifying the reported washback's impacts as either positive or negative (Dong, 2020). Whenever the discrepancies between assessment tasks and the teaching and learning activities used to prepare for the assessment are reduced, a positive (good) washback develops (Cheng, 2014). Nevertheless, when instructors and students concentrated their energies primarily on the exam's subject matter, there were reports of negative (damaging) washback (Saville, 2009). Watanabe (2004) notes particular properties of washback, including uniqueness, strength, intentionality, duration, and the dichotomy between washback's negative and positive aspects. Additionally, language learners' perceptions of the washback effects of exams connected to language might be influenced by washback effect.

Public Examination System and Washback Effect

The traditional educational system forces pupils to take national public examinations, In addition to school-based evaluation, after some programs and high-stakes exams, undoubtedly impact both individuals and society as a whole (Ali et al., 2020). However, washback is not limited to important stakeholders like students and instructors because it is an axiom. Accordingly, test impacts occur on two levels (Cheng, 2013): the micro level, which refers to the effect of the test on specific students and teachers, and the macro level, which refers to the

impact of the test on society or the educational system. This is highlighted by the fact that tests impact society and educational systems (Backman & Palmer, 1996).

Public or external exams serve as performance benchmarks and are essential to students' success in their subsequent coursework (Hou et al., 2022). To evaluate educational materials or outcomes significantly impacting test-takers, external examinations or tests that outside forces or agencies give are referred to as "public examinations" (Gordon, 2020). The public examination system fairly compares different institutions and their pupils in a specific area (Kong et al., 2022). Some contend that while the public examination system fosters extrinsic incentives in students, it also undermines their desire to work hard and learn (Rind & Mari, 2019).

Alternatively, "preparation for high stakes tests often emphasizes rote memorization and cramming of students and drill and practice teaching methods" (Madaus, 1991, p. 7). Most significantly, public examination directs classroom instruction and classroom learning (Ali & Hamid, 2020). Moreover, since exams frequently occur after a course, Pearson (1988) contends that public tests impact students' and parents' view, behavior, and desires. As a result, Pearson coined the term washback. Instructors' washback or backwash results in exam-focused pedagogies (Papakammenou, 2018). Despite their potential to have both positive and bad consequences on educational practices, known as the positive or negative washback effect (Hughes, 2003), they are typically depicted negatively in popular literature, primarily due to the caliber of the assessment. Test effects on the micro level (e.g., teachers and students) should not be disregarded, regardless of test consequences on the macro level. The essence of washback and L2 learners as one of the most vital users of tests, particularly national ones, are elaborated on below.

Washback Effect and L2 Learner

Assessment in general and evaluation (Maghsoudi & Khodamoradi, 2023) in particular are integrated terms that tests and studying the washback effects of tests are of first and foremost importance in these fields. Testing experts and applied linguistics scholars have recently become interested in the washback effect of tests as a significant and ongoing study area. Various scholars have therefore examined the issue for various reasons, such as to determine whether the assessments impact the curriculum or the materials (Amengual Pizarro, 2010). At the micro level incorporated with washback effect, an increasing number of researches have also been performed on washback on language teachers' teaching and instructors' outlooks (Lewthwaite, 2007; Soomro & Shah, 2016), while less research has been done to investigate students' perceptions on various test-related topics, including test design, test use, test importance, test validity, effect and relevance effect on learning practices, in addition to on positive and negative washback impacts (Green, 2007; Xie & Andrews, 2013). Ahmadi Safa and Goodarzi (2014) claim that some washback studies do not even stare learning outcomes. Accordingly, it is crucial to research how exam washback affects students' achievement.

As previously mentioned, there hasn't been much research on how tests affect students' views and perceptions. For instance, Wang (2010) found that the new College English Test 4 Listening Comprehension Subtest (CET 4 LCS) had a more significant positive impact on students' views than a negative one. The listening subtest's design, dependability of the test format, and scoring criteria all received favorable responses from learners. According to Dong et al. (2021), China's National Matriculation English Test (NMET) impacted senior high school pupils' desire to learn. The impacts were mitigated by students' gender, level, and English-language competency. In Tsang and Isaacs's study (2022), the test-takers had favorable opinions of the Hong Kong Diploma of Secondary Education English Language Examination (HKDSE-English) that this resulted in positive washback effect. Additionally, the results identified learner washback effect as a socially placed and negotiated concept.

Some studies have addressed the washback effect of students in Iran as an EFL context. For instance, Siahpoosh, Ramak, and Javandel (2019) examined the washback effect of the IELTS on learners' requirements, points of view, and priorities while studying for the exam's writing task. As they imagined the preparation training classes should adhere to the IELTS exam standard, they noticed the negative washback effect of the test on students' perceptions. However, the exam had a positive effect in that it encouraged the students to improve their vocabulary and writing techniques. To determine whether the centralized final exams had a positive or negative washback effect on teaching and learning, Moradi (2019) surveyed students at Payame Noor University (PNU). The statistical findings from the exams given at PNU showed that the exams had a favorable washback effect on learning and the methods of instruction.

Estaji and Alikhani (2020) outlined how the First Certificate in English test had a washback effect on teachers' and learners' perspectives. The results showed that instructors and students had different views on the exam, with instructors holding a more realistic assessment of the requirement than learners. Shirzadi and Amerian (2020) also evaluated the washback effects of various test forms on learners' writing abilities. They discovered that the supportive teaching approach in a scenario where teachers defined the points accompanying the cloze test and multiple-choice test forms as more helpful exercises for grammar usage had a positive washback effect on learners' grammatical points. They discovered that the content of the materials influences the washback effect. There are just two published scientific articles on the MSRT test, which was the subject of the current study (Ghorbani et al.,2021; Heshmatifar et al., 2018). Using semi-structured telephone interviews, the first study looked at test-takers' experiences, language education specialists' opinions of the exam, and how well they lined up with one another. The issues with the MSRT-EPT and a lack of productive skills included a mismatch between the test's content and the requirements of Ph.D. candidates, a bad washback effect, non-theory-based content, improper listening circumstances, and a lack of novelty in the test topics. The significance of creating a more thorough exam that includes all elements of the language proficiency construct was underlined in light of these findings, and some

recommendations for further study were offered. The other, instead, intended to create a theory on what influences students to enroll in MSRT Test Preparation Courses. In this model, the important positive and negative aspects that influence student enrollment in MSRT Test Preparation Courses were mentioned, including motivation, the advantages of collaborative learning, the potential for information sharing from others, the high cost, and the unreliability of the results.

Considering the novelty and important status of the MSRT test on post-graduate programs in Iran provided in IAUs, it is taken for granted that nearly all Iranian Ph.D. candidates studying at different branches around the country need to achieve the acceptance score in this test (or an analogous one like the EPT test) to graduate. This can reveal the significant role of these proficiency tests for doctorate programs in Iranian universities, as it could severely affect students' learning journey and academic position. It also implies that all Iranian Ph.D. candidates have to improve their English language knowledge. Accordingly, the MSRT exam will likely trigger a great washback effect on Iranian Ph.D. candidates' learning skills. Therefore, the present research was an attempt to investigate the washback effect of the MSRT test on Iranian Ph.D. candidates' learning skills which is an under-researched area. The rationale behind conducting this research is the fact that although a bulk of research has been done on what washback looks like, what the nature of washback is, and why washback exists (Damankesh & Babaii, 2015; Sadler, 2016; Zhan & Andrew, 2014), actually, there is lack of study on how a high-stake test like MSRT test influences EFL learners' perceptions towards language learning at post-graduate settings like Ph.D. courses; hence this study aimed to niche this gap.

Method

Participants

To achieve the purpose of the research, a sample of 150 Iranian Ph.D. students (64 male and 86 female candidates) at the Islamic Azad universities of Shiraz and Marvdasht was chosen through a combination of stratified and convenience sampling methods. The sample was Iranian PhD candidates from different departments at Islamic Azad University, with an age range of 25 to 45 years old. Attempts were taken to gather the data from the participants of each faculty in order to ensure the stratified sampling. Following the research's aim, all participants had taken the MSRT exam within the last year. To ensure the participants' voluntary contributions, consent forms were distributed. Furthermore, to guarantee the heterogeneity of the sample in the second phase of the study, which involved the interviews, purposeful sampling was adopted to recruit interview participants with diverse personal characteristics. After careful analysis of the demographic forms, 20 Iranian Ph.D. candidates who could fulfil the requirements of the study in terms of the widest diversity relating to age, gender, and field were called for the interview.

Instruments

Two data-gathering tools were used in this study. The first was an adopted questionnaire based on Zhang and Bournot-Trites' (2021) research on the washback effect that was revised, modified, and implemented in the present study. In this vein, the analogous questionnaire items relevant to the MSRT test washback effect in Iran were selected and applied to Iranian Ph.D. candidates' English learning. The adopted questionnaire items consist of four parts. The first part includes eight items about participants' background information. Part Two contains 27 items developed based on a five-point Likert scale of agreement. These items generally concern participants' perceptions of the MSRT test purposes, its washback effect on handling university workload, and the MSRT test washback effect on their attitude toward and worry about learning English in university. The third part comprises two multiple-choice questions on some potential reasons participants may have for learning English at university and their major activities and strategies to prepare for the MSRT test. The last part contains two open-ended questions; one question intends to elicit participants' suggestions on how to make the MSRT test more helpful for university English learning, and the other to comment on any issues not covered in the previous items. The questionnaire was validated in two stages before its content and structure were finalized. The first stage involved getting qualitative input, while the second stage involved piloting the instruments in order to perform statistical analyses. Accordingly, Cronbach's alpha reliability estimate ($\alpha = .87$; Sig. $= .001$) was obtained for the overall scale.

The second data gathering tool was a semi-structured interview composed of six sections, intending to elicit the interviewees' perceptions on 1) the MSRT test purposes, 2) the MSRT test washback effect on handling university workload, 3) the MSRT test washback effect on their attitude toward the test and the reason(s) for university English learning, 4) the MSRT test washback effect on their worries in university English learning, 5) the MSRT test washback effect on their university English learning activities and test preparation strategies, and 6) their suggestions to make the MSRT test more useful for university English learning. The same experts checked the validity of the interviews in a similar vein. However, to ascertain the reliability of the interpretations, the comments of two raters (one TEFL professor, one PhD holder) in 5 transcripts were sought to ensure that inter-rater agreement was met.

Procedures

Data were collected in the summer of 2022. In this vein, the finalized questionnaires and consent forms were distributed in person for three weeks. Next, the candidates who met the criteria for inclusion were called for interviews to the point where the researchers agreed upon data saturation. Given the restricting conditions of the world due to the COVID-19 epidemic, the research was conducted either online or face-to-face. Each interview took around 20 to 35 minutes, depending on the interviewees' willingness to talk. They were conducted in a friendly, relaxed, open-ended, and nonjudgmental manner to create a casual and comfortable atmosphere for interviewees to express themselves freely. The interviews were carried out online in Persian

and audiotaped for transcription. The transcripts were translated into English. Initial translations were carried out first and were then submitted to an expert translator for proofreading and refinement. Accordingly, any losses of meaning or distortions in the initial translation were detected and revised to preserve the most accurate vibe of what the students had imparted. Quantitative data analysis was run to analyze the data collected from the questionnaires. Accordingly, a standard multiple regression analysis was performed to estimate the probabilities that participants' responses to each item in these questions were related to their background and experiences and to understand how each variable concerning their experience and background could contribute to or predict their views.

The qualitative data analysis from the two open-ended questions and the interviews were conducted based on the guidance presented by Schmidt (2004). His five-step semi-structured interview analytical strategy was adopted to analyze the interview transcripts. In the first stage, analytical categories were formed by reading intensely and repeatedly through all transcripts to discover the themes and aspects related broadly to the research questions. In the second stage, data entailed formulating and assembling detailed descriptions of the analytical categories into a guide for coding, focusing on the categories' variants (different answers given by interviewees to an analytical category) and different aspects of evidence.

Contingent on the draft analytical categories, their variants and several prospects of evidence, a coding guide with detailed instructions for coding the semi-structured interview transcripts were developed. For instance, after an intensive and repeated reading of all transcripts, it was found that there had been three variants of the interviewees' perceptions of whether their university experience of learning English and MSRT test preparation had offered them any skills they required to handle university tasks: yes, no, or neutral. Therefore, these three tendencies functioned as the guide based on which coders coded the interviewees' narratives on this topic.

The third stage of the analytical interview strategy involved coding all interview transcripts according to the coding guide. The fourth stage quantified the coding results to provide a general overview of the distributions within the transcripts regarding frequencies in the analytical categories. And in the fifth and the last stage of the interview data analysis, detailed interpretations of each interviewee's transcript were conducted to test hypotheses, discover new hypotheses, or suggest new theoretical considerations. The unit of analysis for the interview data was the students' complete responses to each interview question. When coding the interview data, only one code was given to each answer, and the codes matched each research question. In this vein, the interview questions could be divided into three categories corresponding to the three research questions.

Results

Response to the First Research Question
To answer the first research question (RQ1: How do Iranian Ph.D. candidates view the washback effect of the MSRT module implementation on English learning?), the descriptive statistics of the questionnaire data and the corresponding answers to interview questions were

used. First, the results concerning the MSRT test objectives were presented, then MSRT test washback effect on university English learning results, and finally, MSRT washback on university English learning procedures. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of participants' views on the effect of MSRT test objectives.

The descriptive statistics in Table 1 revealed that survey candidates generally had a positive insight on the potential effect of the MSRT exam in achieving its two goals: 1) filtering university graduates in the higher educational study (Mean = 4.94, SD = 1.17), and 2) facilitating changes through concentration on formal linguistic knowledge to the practical use of the English language based on English academic education (Mean = 3.62, SD = 1.17).

MSRT test washback effect was the other category that was focused on in this study, and the participants had different views toward this category (See Table 2).The questionnaire data indicated differences in participants' attitudes toward the English language skills they acquired in the effect of preparation for the MSRT test. Candidates felt that the instruction they received during MSRT test preparation enhanced their English reading (Mean = 4.78, SD = .79) and writing skills (Mean = 4.07, SD = .81) more than their listening (Mean = 3.81, SD = 1.57) and speaking skills (Mean = 3.25, SD = 1.95). Some divergences were also discovered between survey respondents' beliefs and realities. Findings revealed that despite the high wishes of survey respondents for the MSRT test to prepare them entirely to be able to handle university workloads (Mean = 4.11, SD = 1.02), the reality did not meet their expectations (Mean = 3.79, SD = .93). For particular skills required for university requirements, the participants reported the MSRT test preparation resulted in low speaking performance (Mean = 2.97, SD = 1.04) and listening skills (Mean = 3.11, SD = 1.50), compared to reading (Mean = 3.98, SD = .81) and writing skills (Mean = 3.80, SD = 1.03). A meticulous analysis of the frequency of the candidates' responses to the survey items reinforces the previous divergences concerning the disparities between survey respondents' beliefs and realities. For instance, around % 72 of the responses to item 13 strongly confirmed the effectiveness of the MSRT exam in improving their reading abilities. This is, however, counter to the effect of this exam on their speaking ability (around % 22) based on the achieved frequencies of their responses.

The imbalance between the supply of MSRT test preparation and the workload of university English learning was also addressed in the interviews. 13 candidates reported that this challenge became particularly evident when preparing for the MSRT test at university. As Seven (pseudonym) mentioned in the interview,

> The test [MSRT] ... does not match the university requirements. I know I should work on my English, but I hope the university can find a better way to test the students' knowledge and find a more practical way.

However, despite the gap between the preparation for MSRT test and practical English learning and its relevance to university workload, survey respondents felt that their English skills enhanced as a result of university English learning. When asked what might describe their abilities to increase and cope with English reading university workloads, 15 interviewees

pointed out the contribution of their MSRT test preparation experiences and exercises. This result was not a far-fetched image provided that the central focus of study in the Iranian educational context indirectly concerns becoming test-wise. Even though the English reading skills they had brought with them to universities were insufficient to meet university requirements, they nevertheless considered these demands manageable.

Accordingly, they believed that the MSRT test preparation had equipped them with a proper foundation in basic reading skills which was sufficient for them to succeed in university English learning. About English writing, 13 interviewees stated that their English writing learning during MSRT test preparation had also facilitated university tests in the writing section. Results concerning the long-term MSRT test washback effect on candidates' learning processes demonstrated that the general levels of survey respondents' insights, interests, tendencies towards learning English, and worries were consistent with minor positive changes from past to present.

Moreover, their MSRT test preparation experiences were widely perceived as not having a negative effect on their university English learning activities in these respects. Besides, following the interview data, 17 out of the 20 candidates mentioned that their MSRT test preparation experiences reinforced their self-esteem and bolstered their English skills to higher levels in their studies.

It is worth noting that a larger number of candidates selected meeting the graduation demands, preparation and managing university workloads and getting better job opportunities as their reasons to learn English in university. Enhancing their chances of admission to graduate programs was the prevailing reason among survey participants for learning English (77.1 %). While learning English to manage university workload (68.9 %) and achieving better job opportunities (63.1 %) also demonstrated the reasons of the majority of survey respondents for university English learning. Collected data from interview questions on the same topic demonstrated that twelve interviewees addressed that their MSRT preparation experience had assisted establishing realistic personal goals for learning English. Similarly, fifteen, architecture majored, claimed that they needed satisfactory scores in high-stakes English tests to enhance future opportunities, and it stayed so throughout his English learning journey.

Fifteen's perception was not uncommon among the interviewees. Several other interview participants claimed that the compulsory nature of the MSRT test and their preparation experiences enhanced their awareness of the critical role of English abilities and proficiency in their future prospects, such as in their probabilities for having better job offers and their outlooks for academic accomplishments (Six and Eleven). Accordingly, their personal goals bestowed them several reasons for learning English in the Ph.D. program. In contrast to the changes in survey respondents' reasons for learning English, their major preparation strategies for high-stakes English tests stayed the same (See Figure 1). Their main MSRT test preparation strategies were in diminishing order, doing mock tests, developing English language skills in

general, reviewing previous test samples and enhancing the language skills in which they were not good enough.

Concerning his experience, number four (pseudonym) shared his opinion on why doing mock tests was the most prevalent test preparation strategy in university study. As he mentioned,

Now I've realized the importance of MSRT test samples, and this learning strategy worked well. It is an effective learning method… to get familiar with the test format and to be aware of the distance between the requirement of the test and my language proficiency. I will apply this strategy in any future test that I may have since it seems to be very helpful.

Ten other interview participants also recommended that the effective strategy of taking mock tests during their MSRT test preparation assured them to follow the same learning strategy for high-stakes tests in general. In sum, research participants showed a generally positive evaluation of the effectiveness of the MSRT in achieving its purposes concerning doing a good job in serving a gate-keeping/selection function as well as bringing changes from focusing on formal linguistic knowledge to practice and use of the language to university English learning. They were also positive about the long-term MSRT test washback effect on their university English learning results and processes. However, MSRT test preparation was considered not to help students with adequate English speaking and listening skills compared to reading and writing skills for university English requirements.

Response to the Second Research Question

The second research question aimed to explore the participants' attitudes towards the changes they perceive as Essential to make the MSRT module implementation more useful for English Learning. Responses of the participants to the open-ended questions in the survey and interview guide (What changes are needed for the MSRT test to be more useful for university English learning? Why do you think so? Please specify and comment) involved their recommendations on necessary changes and alterations for the MSRT test to further facilitate university English learning. Their feedback was in line with their viewpoints on why MSRT test preparation had not satisfactorily prepared them to manage university workloads. The analysis for the open-ended survey question, among the 150 participants who filled out the questionnaire, revealed that the six most prevalent present concordances (above 50 percent of frequency) in research participants' suggestions could be divided into two groups:

  - First group: to present mandatory MSRT test speaking subtest, and
  - Second Group: to narrow the gap between MSRT teaching and assessment (see Table 3).

Adding a speaking subtest to the MSRT exam as a critical task was suggested by most participants both in the survey and the interview. From the viewpoint of the survey respondents, their English-speaking proficiency was comparatively inadequate for post-graduate study programs. Based on the interviewees, this was primarily due to the optional nature of the

students' choice to improve speaking skills. Several candidates mentioned that the administrators, English teachers and professors, and students shared a mutual conviction that previous experience in English education and MSRT test preparation should assist their English-speaking improvement in post-graduate educational study. However, the MSRT test status quo was not helpful in this concern.

However, several stakeholders were fully conscious of the fact that it was extremely difficult to add a speaking subtest as a non-optional choice in the MSRT exam in a nationwide context due to the differences existed among different majors and their priorities in Iranian context. Hence, they attempted to improve the English-speaking abilities of the students to facilitate and lead students' speaking in English in post-graduate programs. Students' comments further offered that the efforts of individual stakeholders alone cannot be sufficiently effective at improving post-graduate students' English-speaking proficiency in higher education stages. Hence, they strongly support adding a verbal section to the MSRT exam.

Concerning the listening skills, both survey and interview participants agreed that the MSRT test listening subtest should be implemented in all tests. This act, as they perceived, would draw great and immediate attention from all stakeholders to enhance the students' English listening abilities and thus present a strong washback effect on English learning and teaching at the university level. This would sequentially assist students to manage university workloads and improve in learning English. The other common proposition among the participants was to bridge the gap between the MSRT test technical manual and university requirements in English language teaching, learning, and assessment. Based on the participants' point of views, the split between the test and previous English education concerning curriculum standards and requirements of high-stakes tests triggered great challenges to their English learning. Therefore, they hoped that a systematic mechanism of national standards could guide gradual, smooth, and coherent alteration from easy to difficult based on university English curricula and tests.

Following several research participants' experiences, university English courses and tests cover various text types, topics, and communication settings, particularly for academic purposes. However, the interviewees had scarce knowledge or practice in practicing the English language. Even though a few other interviewees confirmed their MSRT test preparations had advanced their English reading skills, their reading abilities were not well-suited for handling university English reading tasks, which often engage in reading academic papers and technical reports. Therefore, they showed their desire to improve English education to prepare students more adequately and facilitate a gradual transition from lower to higher levels of English learning. It was a helpful revision in achieving the anticipated and satisfactory learning results. Research participants believed that this understanding emphasized the mismatch between the proper support and standard of English education and the requirements of higher education studies. It can be identified through direct intercommunications between stakeholders and candidates, and with the guidance of a unified standard of English language competence that adjusts and coordinates university English learning requirements under one systematic

framework. In summary, research participants offered that a speaking subtest to MSRT test as a non-optional choice would produce a positive washback in teaching and learning in all university majors. Moreover, they asked for stakeholders' communication with real examinees in higher education programs to create unified teaching, learning, and assessment standards that coordinate English learning.

Discussion

The present study attempted to comprehensively understand Iranian PhD candidates' views towards the washback of the MSRT module implementation on English learning and the changes needed for this nationwide test. The quantitative and qualitative data analysis results via a survey and semi-structured interview sessions re-leveled some positive and negative test washback effect to MSRT. In general, Ph.D. candidates regarded the influence of the MSRT test positively, facilitating English learning at the university. Candidates' reactions to the questionnaire items indicated that the instruction they received during MSRT test preparation enhanced their English reading and writing skills more than their listening and speaking skills. This finding was also consistent with the interview data. In accordance with the interviewees' recollections, instructors generally devoted more time to reading in their whole educational experience in Iranian context and also the reading items weighed the most in the MSRT. The participants were grateful for the large number of reading practices they had in university and educational experience, which considerably improved their English reading proficiency.

The findings are also consistent with the theories put forth by Brown and Abeywickrama (2013), who thought that a test that offers helpful or positive washback effect is more formative than summative and provides learners with the feedback they need for language development. However, a test which enforces the learners with the negative washback had an unfavourable impact on instruction and learning (Alderson & Wall, 1993) and can cause imbalance on the gains in test sub-tests, as experienced in this study. Additionally, the findings of this study are consistent with Yildrim's (2010) study, which discovered that ECFLUEE, as a nation-wide test with various sub-tests such as reading and speaking sections, had adverse washback effects on teachers and pupils. Only reading ability, grammar, and vocabulary were evaluated by ECFLUEE as a high-stakes university entrance exam in Turkey; writing and speaking abilities were not evaluated. Similarly, Akpnar and Akldere (2013) found that two high-stakes language examinations in Turkey, the KPDS and ÜDS, had positive washback effects on participants' reading skills and negative washback effects on their writing, listening, and speaking abilities. It may be possible to accept the research participants' suggestions to make adding a speaking subtest to the MSRT test mandatory by comparing the results of the current study with those of Qi (2004). As a result, making the speaking subtest part of the MSRT test would significantly reduce the MSRT test washback effect, which would greatly aid students' efforts to learn English in post-graduate programs. Additionally, it would lay a solid foundation for students' English-speaking proficiency and other skills, creating a solid foundation for their post-

graduate study programs. It would also expand the before-test MSRT washback effect to support English learning and expedite development towards the goal of students being able to manage university workloads fully.

The results are in line with Akpnar and Akldere's study (2013) that gained to some extent similar to the results of this study. They discovered that two high-stakes language examinations in Turkey (KPDS and ÜDS) in Turkey had positive washback effects on participants' reading skills (as the same results was gained in the current study) and negative washback effects on their listening and speaking abilities (again the same as the findings of the current study). These findings are consistent with those of the studies previously conducted (e.g., Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011; Zhan & Andrews, 2014). The common finding is that several national English proficiency exams had a negative washback effect, especially due to the role of instruction. The great majority of the teachers tend to teach some sub-tests such as reading more than the others that this resulted in neglecting several skills such as listening and writing. The inconsistent results of several earlier research studies can be justified by the type of data gathering instruments, the context, and the motivation of the participants of the studies. Additionally, by combining qualitative and quantitative methods while limiting unimportant variables, we could see the topic from a wider angle.

It is worthwhile that the ministry of education hopes to develop the speech subset MSRT test implementations among the future probable MSRT test reformulation actions. This recommendation is consistent with a study by Zhang (2019) on a comparable national English test in China, where the findings suggested the inclusion of speaking and listening tasks to raise the bar for English test requirements. According to the current study's findings, the students identified themselves as motivated learners, which might be interpreted as a result of the MSRT exam's widespread positive washback. The results contrast with those of Sadeghi, Ballada, and Mede (2021), who used a mixed-methods approach to examine how the TOEFL iBT and a local English Proficiency Exam affected students' autonomy, motivation, and language-learning strategies. The findings showed that the TOEFL iBT exam had no negative effects on students' motivation or autonomy.

To sum up, it has been widely accepted that incorporating skills is a prerequisite to the validity of every proficiency test, hence it should be pointed out that teaching and learning English (including all of the skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing) in MSRT test surely would enhance its validity. It would be consistent with the TLU domains of university English education that usually ask for all skills from students when they attend academic lectures and deliver academic presentations. Meanwhile, the candidates in the present research maintain that the disjunction in the MSRT-bridged continuum of English education from university workload hinders the MSRT test from generating direct and desirable washback effect to support university students' English learning processes and results. The reason behind this could be the disconnection between university English requirements and the MSRT test technical manual. The claim presented by the candidates seems reasonable, provided that the

basic requirements in the universities' English teaching guide normally ask students to be involved with academic discourses and activities through their four English skills. Based on a graduated system and unified criteria of English proficiency through one common terminology and interpretation, the MSRT test intended to simplify English education concerning curricular and assessment requirements. Moreover, the MSRT test could serve as a theoretical foundation for improving itself by producing the intended washback effect. This could be done by enhancing a scientifically, practically, and feasibly graded National English Testing System that would adjust the MSRT test and other high-stakes English tests in Iran to an integral unity.

Conclusion

The current study used an explanatory sequential mixed-method study as one of the highly used and valid methods in the research related to humanities (Karimi & Mozaffar, 2018) and was conducted in the present study. Accordingly, quantitative and qualitative data were collected through a questionnaire in the first phase and a semi-structured interview in the second. Concerning the first research question (How do Iranian PhD candidates view the washback effect of the MSRT module implementation on English learning?), the participants demonstrated a generally positive evaluation of the effectiveness of the MSRT test in achieving its objectives, in doing a good job, in serving a gate-keeping/selection function, as well as bringing changes from focusing on formal linguistic knowledge to practice and use of the language to university English learning. The students had a positive attitude about the long-term MSRT test washback effect on their university English learning results and processes. However, MSRT test preparation was not considered very helpful to students as it did not provide adequate English speaking and listening skills compared to reading and writing skills for university English requirements. About the second research question (What changes do Iranian Ph.D. candidates perceive as essential to make the MSRT module implementation more useful for English learning?), the participants recommended that a speaking subtest to MSRT test as a non-optional choice would bring positive washback in teaching and learning in all university fields. In addition, they asked for stakeholders' communication with real examinees in higher education programs to create unified teaching, learning, and assessment standards that coordinate English learning.

Based on the population investigated, the literature studied, and the research findings, a number of inferences can be made from the current study. First, it may be deduced that the test substance and university workload were not in sync, as indicated by students' statements. In this line, some candidates noted issues and difficulties they encountered despite expecting the MSRT to fully prepare them for handling academic responsibilities. Second, the suggestions made by the students for improving the usefulness and impact of the MSRT test were well-informed. As a result, future exam revisions may consider and include a fresh objective to present useful washback effect and aid in university English learning.

The present research offers some pedagogical implications for practitioners and test designers. Stakeholders, policy-makers, and program developers in the educational systems may get assistance from the results of this study to pay attention to the problematic sub-parts of the MSRT test and its weaknesses and strengths to enhance the quality and practicality of the test. The findings can also expand the perspective of prospective researchers in the relevant field as gaining profound insights into the washback effect of high-stakes tests, including the MSRT test which can be a useful source of inspiration to eliminate the potential negative points in further implementations of the test in the long run.

Considering the gathered results, the study has some limitations which should be addressed in further research. First, as the study was conducted on one single test, future research could be expanded by examining and comparing similar language exams across countries. Secondly, this study has relied on self-reported student data. As Nisbett and Wilson (1977) point out, such information is easily prone to expectancy bias. A follow up study could be done by triangulating the data via observation from the teaching courses are held for the nation-wide exams like the MSRT test. Despite all the evidence in favor of a potential MSRT test modification, longitudinal empirical research will be useful in closely monitoring the washback effects of the MSRT test reform initiatives. To carefully assess the effectiveness of the revisions and modification of the measures as necessary to address any unintended consequences that might arise, the MSRT examination authority, policy-makers, and the language testing academia will also need to be informed of the results of the scientifically performed empirical research studies.

 Declaration of interest statement:
Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest among the authors.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Students' View on the Effect of the MSRT Test Goals

MSRT Test Goals	Mean	Standard Deviation
Filtering university graduates in higher educational study	4.94	1.17
Facilitating changes ... in English academic education	3.62	1.17

Table 2

Frequencies of Candidate Responses to the MSRT Washback

| Item	Statements	1	2	3	4	5
		Percentage (%)				
9	The MSRT serves its gate-keeping function well.	1.8	6.2	16.0	24.6	51.4
10	The MSRT brings changes from focusing on formal linguistic knowledge to practice and use of English.	4.2	7.8	22.6	31.4	34.0
11	MSRT preparation improved my English listening skills.	5.6	8.3	24.2	33.6	28.3
12	MSRT preparation improved my English-speaking skills.	9.1	16.9	20.1	31.3	22.6
13	MSRT preparation improved my English reading skills.	1.1	1.9	6.0	18.2	72.8
14	MSRT preparation improved my English writing skills.	3.4	4.6	14.7	26.1	51.2
15	MSRT preparation should fully prepare students to handle university workload.	1.9	2.1	17.9	33.3	44.8
16	MSRT preparation fully prepared me to handle university workload.	10.3	13.6	17.1	32.4	26.6
17	MSRT preparation provided me with the English listening skills needed to handle university workload.	9.8	8.2	28.9	25.6	27.5
18	MSRT preparation provided me with the English-speaking skills needed to handle university workload.	13.7	17.4	20.9	24.2	23.8
19	MSRT preparation provided me with the English reading skills needed to handle university workload.	4.3	6.6	23.3	31.7	34.1
20	MSRT preparation provided me with the English writing skills needed to handle university workload.	8.0	8.8	21.9	27.9	33.3
21	My English listening skills are high enough to handle university workload.	5.8	10.6	28.1	29.5	26.0
22	My English-speaking skills are high enough to handle university workload.	9.3	14.8	20.2	29.8	25.9
23	My English reading skills are high enough to handle university workload.	4.9	8.	21	31	35.1
24	My English writing skills are high enough to handle university workload.	3.1	7.3	18.4	24.9	46.3

25	I have a positive attitude toward university English learning.	3.3	5.	23.7	40.6	27.4
26	My MSRT preparation experiences did not bring negative changes to my English learning attitude.	2.3	8.4	26.0	37.7	25.6
27	I am interested in learning English in university.	4.6	8.7	27.5	34.3	24.9
28	My MSRT preparation experiences did not diminish my English learning interest in university.	3.7	10.9	26.8	30.7	27.9
29	I have a strong desire to learn English in university.	1.9	2.3	15.6	30.4	49.8
30	My MSRT preparation experiences did not diminish my English learning desire in university.	6.0	8.5	22.8	26.7	36.0
31	I am not worried about learning English in university.	4.1	7.9	25.9	31.2	30.9
32	My MSRT preparation experiences did not worsen my worries about learning English in university.	4.1	7.4	21.2	32.3	35.0
33	I was not worried about MSRT preparation.	4.1	8.0	23.1	32.1	32.7

Table 3

Concordance Frequencies of Survey Question No. 36 (Top 6 Categories Above 50%).

Concordance	Frequency	First Group	Second Group
adding speaking test	95%	X	
gap between MSRT technical manual and university requirements in English language	92%		X
unified MSRT. educational system, and university English curriculum standards	87%		X
weak English listening and speaking skills	76%	X	
English for academic purposes	73%		X
slower change in the expected level of English at university	51%		X

Figure 1. *Main Test Washback Strategies at University*

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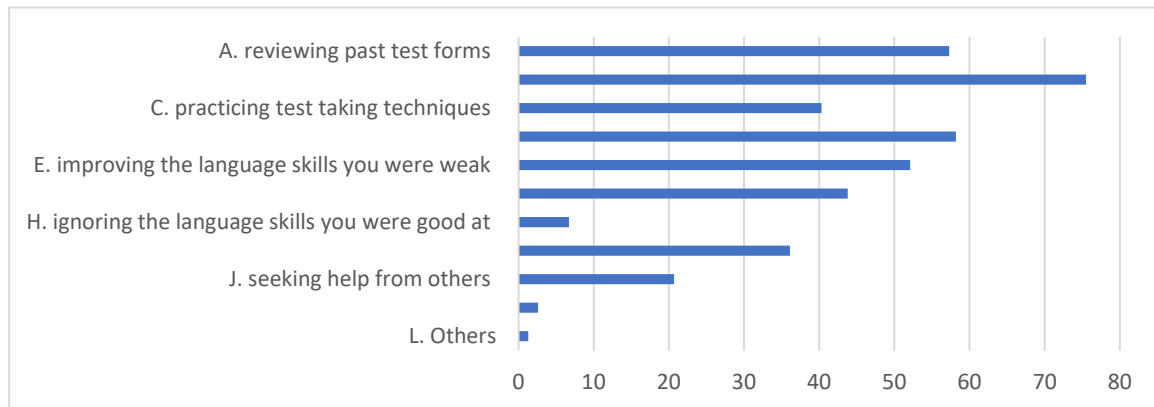
تاثیر پسخیز آزمون وزارت علوم، تحقیقات و فناوری (MSRT) بر مهارت‌های یادگیری زبان انگلیسی داوطلبان دکتری ایرانی

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چکیده

این مطالعه با روش مختلط و متوالی با هدف بررسی تأثیر پسخیز آزمون داخلی بسندگی زبان انگلیسی آزمون وزارت علوم، تحقیقات و فناوری (MSRT) در مهارت های یادگیری زبان انگلیسی داوطلبان در مقطع دکتری ایرانی انجام گردید . علاوه بر آن، به بررسی تغییراتی پرداخت که داوطلبان ایرانی مقطع دکتری برای مفیدتر کردن اجرای ماژول MSRT برای یادگیری زبان انگلیسی ضروری می دانند. به این منظور، یک نمونه ۱۵۰ نفری از داوطلبان دکتری با جنسیت، سن و رشته های مختلف از دانشگاه‌های آزاد اسلامی شیراز و مرودشت برای تکمیل پرسش‌نامه طراحی شده در زمینه تاثیر پسخیز آزمون MSRT دعوت شدند. شرکت کنندگان از طریق مختلط از طریق نمونه گیری طبقه ای و و در دسترس انتخاب شدند . همچنین نمونه ای متشکل از ۲۰ داوطلب دکتری از همین جامعه بر اساس نمونه گیری هدفمند انتخاب و در جلسات مصاحبه نیمه ساختاریافته شرکت نمودند. نتایج تجزیه و تحلیل داده‌ها نشان‌دهنده برخی اثرات مثبت و منفی پسخیز بر آزمون وزارت علوم، تحقیقات و فناوری MSRT بود. علاوه بر این، آزمودنی‌ها توصیه هایی را در مورد تغییرات لازم برای آزمون MSRT درجهت تسهیل بیشتر یادگیری زبان انگلیسی در دانشگاهها پیشنهاد کردند، به نحوی که بازخورد آنها با نظراتشان در مورد اینکه چرا آمادگی MSRT به طور رضایت بخشی آنها را برای مدیریت بار کاری دانشگاه آماده نکرده بود، مطابقت داشت که می‌تواند در کاربردهای آموزشی مورد بحث قرار گیرد.

کلیدواژگان: آزمون‌های جامع، آزمون زبان، مهارت‌های یادگیری، آزمون وزارت علوم، تحقیقات و فناوری، تأثیر پسخیز آزمون.