Voices from Thai EFL Teachers: Perceptions and Beliefs towards the English Test in the National Examination in Thailand

Pariwat Imsa-ard
University of York, United Kingdom
pimsaard@gmail.com

Abstract

The Ordinary National Educational Test (O-NET), the national examination in Thailand, plays as a high-stakes test at an upper secondary school level as it can be used as a tool for several purposes in education such as gatekeepers for the university entry and measures for the teaching quality evaluation. English, out of the five core subjects in the O-NET, is believed to result in a high degree of washback effects for both teachers and students. Teachers and students are eagerly seeking how to reach high scores by mainly concentrating on the test-wiseness strategies, although the goal of English language teaching in Thailand is aimed at developing the English ability concerning both linguistics and communication. With respect to the English O-NET, this study aims to explore what Thai EFL teachers at an upper secondary school level think about the English test in the O-NET. The mixed-methods approach was employed to attain the research objective. A hundred teachers completed the questionnaires and 10 of them took part in the follow-up interviews. The main findings revealed that the majority of teachers were not satisfied with the English O-NET although they tended to focus on the test paper and taught to the test due to some pressures from other stakeholders in educational settings. The findings suggested that the test should include other aspects of language skills, such as listening and speaking, to avoid dependence on rote-learning and memorisation Some implications are also discussed in this study.

Keywords: English test, achievement test, O-NET, national examination, teachers' perception

Introduction

Testing and assessment, especially in high-stakes tests, can exert washback effects on teaching and learning. The term *washback* can broadly be defined as the impact of a test. In Thailand, the Ordinary National Education Test (O-NET) is believed to be crucial for both students and teachers because students use the O-NET scores as one of the university entry requirements and teachers' teaching performance is evaluated based on the O-NET scores. From this reason, students are trying to reach high scores on the O-NET, and teachers want to facilitate this. For example, some teachers stated that their teaching practice was mainly based on the test (Imsa-ard, 2019a; Lunrasri, 2014). According to Thai Ministry of Education (2009), the goal of English language teaching in Thailand is to build students' communicative competence so they can communicate in English. Moreover, the O-NET achievement test, which is constructed in accordance with the Basic Education Core Curriculum, is aimed at measuring academic proficiency and thinking ability (NIETS, 2013). However, the O-NET comprises only multiple-choice questions without performance measures focusing on productive skills. Due to its specific test format, it is believed that drilling, memorisation, and test-wiseness strategies are more concentrated on than practising the communicative language (Prapphal, 2008). Moreover, Imsa-ard (2019b) asserted that multiple-choice questions with the predetermined correct responses may result in guessing, which affects the measurement of a students' ability and real performance.

In light of the importance of the O-NET, it is becoming difficult to ignore the existence of the washback effects that could have an impact on teachers. To date, there have been few empirical investigations into the washback effects of the national examination in Thailand, especially on teaching. Therefore, this study aimed to explore teachers' perceptions towards the English test in the O-NET and whether it is worthwhile. It is hoped that the findings from this study, which critically examined teachers' views of the O-NET particularly their perceptions of the washback effects of the English test in the national examination, will benefit English language teachers in Thailand and provide insights to those in similar EFL contexts about how the high-stakes English tests affect teachers' perceptions and the possible ways to promote positive washback in English language classrooms.

Review of Literature

Washback

Testing has long been believed to have a direct impact on the educational processes in various ways (Taylor, 2005). Concerning the test impact, *washback* is a common term in the field of language assessment that refers to the test impacts. Hence, it is necessary to clarify exactly what is meant by *washback*. Over the past decades, several scholars have defined the term in various ways (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Baker, 1991). In the language assessment literature, Baker (1991) defines *washback* as a test impact. Similarly, Alderson and Wall (1993) also suggest the term *washback* as an impact of testing on teaching and learning. Moreover, Bachman and Palmer (1996) refer to *washback* as a test impact. Likewise, Green (2013) illustrates that washback effects refer to "the impact that a test has on the teaching and learning done in preparation for it" (p. 40). In broad terms, *washback* is attached to the concept of the influence of the test in testing and teaching.

Over the decades, testing has had consequences on educational processes such as teaching, learning, and even curriculum planning. With regard to its impacts, it is a widely held view that washback can be analysed and categorised into two directions: positive and negative (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Bailey, 1996; Brown & Hudson, 2002; Hughes, 2003; Taylor, 2005). When washback is positive, it has a beneficial impact on education. To illustrate, positive washback refers to when the test promotes a beneficial impact on education, when a test reflects the abilities and skills taught in the course, or when teaching and learning goals are fulfilled, a test induces teachers to complete the syllabi thoroughly, and learners are motivated to work harder in order to enhance their learning accomplishment (Pan, 2009). For example, Turner's (2006) study on the impact of the provincial exam reform on the teaching of 153 ESL secondary school teachers in Quebec, France, revealed that teachers had positive attitudes towards the exam reform and washback on teaching in classrooms was positive, as enhancing students learning was reported as their intended goal in teaching practices.

Conversely, negative washback provides harmful effects on education. In literature, negative washback refers to when the test fails to assess the actual performance that the test is intended to measure and thus constrains the teaching and learning context (Taylor, 2005). Moreover, negative washback also causes an effect in which there is an increase in students' scores without a concomitant increase in learning (Chalak & Mansoor, 2010). By way of illustration, Amengual-Pizarro's (2010) study exploring the washback effects of a high-stakes English test on the teaching of English in Spanish upper secondary schools revealed that the test appeared to influence teachers' methodology. To elaborate, teachers reported ignoring important aspects of that were not tested in the examination and making use of a test format imitation in the hope that the students will succeed, thus concluding that washback is evaluated based on how much it helps or harms the educational process.

Further, there is a broad agreement that high-stakes tests plausibly yield strong washback effects (Luxia, 2005). Correspondingly, Alderson and Wall (1993) demonstrated that high-stakes tests have a profound influence on language teaching and learning. Also, Stobart (2003) illustrates that high-stakes testing "is never a neutral process and always has consequences for its stakeholders" (p. 140). A national examination is considered as one type of high-stakes tests, as they are used as a means to make decisions concerning students, teachers, and schools in the country (Lorenz, Eickelmann, & Bos, 2016). In Thailand, the O-NET is a national examination that is considered as a high-stakes test and plays a crucial role in students' and teachers' lives.

The English Test in the O-NET

The English test in the O-NET consists of 80 multiple-choice questions with 100 points. The most recent test structure is demonstrated in Table 1 below of Academic Years 2016-2018 available on NIETS's website was analysed as follows.

Table 1: The Structure of the English O-NET in Academic Years 2017-2018 (NIETS, 2019)

Part	Topic	No. of Qs	Points	Test Format
1	**Language Use**			
1.1	2 Dialog Completion	10	12.5	Five multiple choice and one correct answer
1.2	Situational Dialogs	5	6.25	Five multiple choice and one correct answer
1.3	Sentence Completion	10	12.5	Gap-filling with five multiple choice and one correct answer
1.4	Error Correction	10	12.5	Five multiple choice and one correct answer
2	**Writing Ability**			
	Text completion	10	12.5	Gap-filling with five multiple choice and one correct answer
3	**Reading Ability**			
3.1	Vocabulary	5	6.25	Gap-filling with five multiple choice and one correct answer
3.2	Reading Comprehension			
	- 1 Advertisement	5	6.25	Five multiple choice and one correct answer
	- News extract	6	7.5	Five multiple choice and one correct answer
	- Horoscope extract	5	6.25	Five multiple choice and one correct answer
	- 2 text passages	14	17.5	Five multiple choice and one correct answer
	Total	80	100	

It is claimed that the O-NET is developed in conformity with the Basic Education Core Curriculum (NIETS, 2013). However, the O-NET has been controversial in that the test itself is not aligned with the goal of the national curriculum—constructing communicative competence to build "the ability to use foreign languages for communicating in various situations" (Ministry of Education, 2009, p. 252). Generally, it is believed that a multiple-choice test could allow "test-wise students to answer such items correctly without knowing the content it is said to measure" (Henning, 2012, p. 35). Consequently, language testing in Thailand does not seem to keep pace and mismatches with its goal of English language teaching.

According to Imsa-ard (2019a) and Lunrasri (2014), Thai EFL teachers reported that they mainly focused on the test and used old test papers to teach in their classes. Still, the mean scores of the English test in the O-NET have been lower than 50 and kept falling below standard in the last 6 years. Hence, it is questionable whether such practices help to boost students' scores or not. Interestingly, Nipakornkitti and Adunyarittigun (2018) demonstrate that "the O-NET test items were partially aligned with the national curriculum" (p. 56). They also illustrate that one of the factors causing the low O-NET scores is the test itself as the level of difficulty is higher than what is taught in the class.

Thus, the aim of this study is to explore teachers' perceptions on the English test in the O-NET and why they still teach to the test.

Teachers' Beliefs

Beliefs are considered as attitudes, values, preconceptions, and images, which can be derived from teachers' experiences (Pajares, 1992); such beliefs can affect teaching practices. Grave (2002) demonstrates that beliefs can govern the teaching behaviours of teachers. In addition, Borg (2011) and Arnett and Turnbull (2008) further support that teaches' beliefs offer a basis for action that leads to teachers' decision-making in the classroom, i.e., teachers' beliefs can direct teachers' choices of practices such as implementing lessons, selecting learning activities, and assessing students (Rios, 1996).

However, Pajares (1992) claims that teachers' stated beliefs are not always a "very reliable guide to reality" (p. 326). This corresponds with the study by Basturkmen, Loewen, and Ellis (2004), which demonstrated that teachers' stated beliefs and actual practices had a "tenuous relationship" (p. 243). They also indicated an inconsistency between stated beliefs and teaching practices among teachers. Some possible explanation made by Basturkmen (2012) could be that some beliefs may conflict with other factors at another time such as student factors and school policy factors, and "the responsibility beliefs may moderate the relationship between beliefs and teaching practices" in an attempt to support students' outcomes (Buehl & Beck, 2015, p. 75). In addition, Tayjasanant and Barnard (2010) indicate that the contextual factors which regularly constrain teachers' practices as follows (pp. 303-304):

- *Administration-related constraints*: this includes the national curriculum, school's policies, and teaching time allotment;
- *A content constraint*: this is concerned with teaching content which is not interesting to students or content with cultural differences;
- *Student constraints*: this involves their behaviour and motivation; and
- *Expectation constraints*: this concerns students', parents' and other stakeholders' preference for language learning, particularly grammar and vocabulary learning for exams

With respect to washback, teachers play a significant role in fostering the different directions of washback. Teachers' beliefs are "a critical factor in determining the washback effect" (Pan, 2009, p. 261). To elaborate, teachers may believe that the test forces them to teach what meets the needs of the test. Also, Chapman and Snyder (2000) and Spratt (2005) expressed a similar opinion by stating that the teacher plays a significant role in determining the directions of washback and teachers' beliefs towards the test influence the changes in teaching behaviour.

Related Washback Studies

There has been a range of research investigating the washback effects of the high-stakes tests. Some studies investigated and determined the washback effects of widely used language tests and some of the others concentrated on the national examinations. Studies relevant to this study are demonstrated as follows.

Alderson and Wall (1993) examined the new "O" Level English examination on language teaching in 14 schools in Sri Lanka by employing direct observation, interviews and questionnaires. Their findings revealed that the test did not affect teaching contents but teaching methodology. However, Sommit (2009) discovered some different findings in her study. She examined how the national examination had any impacts on secondary school teachers' teaching practices in Bangkok through questionnaires and interviews. She carried out her study with teachers in different subjects and compared how they taught before and after the national examination was administered. The questionnaire was administered with 550 teachers, and interview sessions were conducted with 15 teachers for the data collection. The results showed that only Mathematics and Science teachers prepared for the test, while other subject teachers including English did not teach to the test. The possible explanation would be that Mathematics and Science had a clear specification of the tests concerning the test contents while English had only a broad overview of the test blueprint.

In Ethiopia, Gashaye (2012) examined the impact of the English exam in the university entrance exams on teaching and learning of 62 Grade 11 students and 12 teachers through classroom observation and questionnaires. The results revealed that both teachers and students were test-driven. To illustrate, teachers had teaching-to-the-test practices and teachers' teaching methods were changed to prepare their students for the University Entrance English Exam (UEEE) by focusing its test format, which consisted of sole multiple-choice questions. Likewise, Kiliçkaya (2016) found similar findings to Gashaye (2012). He explored the impact of the foreign language section of TEOG (Transition Examination from Primary to Secondary Education) on 30 English language teachers' practices in the classrooms in Turkey. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 English teachers at the lower secondary school level. The findings revealed that teachers' practices were greatly affected and skills that were not assessed such as listening, speaking and writing were neglected in the classroom.

In addition to washback on teachers, Lunrasri (2014) examined the washback effects of the English O-NET on English language learning as perceived by Grade 9 students. In her study, she used the questionnaire and structured interviews. The findings revealed that students did not only focus learning on communicative skills but they also used rote-memorisation as they feared for the low O-NET scores. Additionally, they were unsure if the test contents were associated with the contents of textbooks.

To sum up, it has been shown from this review that a variety of washback studies have been examined in different types of tests and different contexts. There have been both positive and negative washback in such studies. Thus, it can be said that washback depends on tests and contexts. According to the review of the literature on related washback studies, there are several studies on the washback effects from the vantage points in different types of

tests in different contexts. This is exemplified in the work undertaken by Sommit (2009) who carried out a comparative study on the effects of the O-NET in different subjects in general education on teachers' practices in Bangkok. Moreover, Lunrasri (2014) focused on the English O-NET for a lower secondary school level but her study focused only on Grade 9 students. This could be one of the research gaps that should investigate specifically more on the impact of the English test on teachers.

Although there are several studies on washback effects all over the world, little attention has been specifically paid to studies on teachers' perceptions underlying washback phenomenon and none were based on washback effects of the English test of the O-NET in Grade 12 on upper secondary school teachers in Thailand. This presented a clear research gap for this study that needs to be filled.

Research Question

After reviewing the territory and summarising the literature, the research question that this study intended to address resulted from the gap that has not been investigated as follows:

- What are Thai EFL teachers' declared perceptions towards the English test in the National Examination in Thailand?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a sequential mixed-methods approach. In such an approach, both quantitative and qualitative data collection and data analysis are operated sequentially (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). In essence, Patton (2002) demonstrates that "triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods" (p. 247), meaning using several kinds of data collection. Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) assert that the combination of varied data collection from multiple methods can validate and cross-check the findings. Moreover, the use of mixed-methods research is increasingly popular in language testing and assessment in general (Cheng & Fox, 2017). Regarding washback studies, the majority of washback studies conducted by well-known researchers (e.g. Baker, 2010; Cheng, 2001; Green, 2007; Turner, 2006; Wall, 2005; Watanabe, 2004) adopted a mixed-methods research approach. In addition, Turner (2006) asserts that mixed-methods approach helps "respond to certain types of [research] questions, especially those having to do with classroom context" (p. 108). On grounds of the strengths and the growing recognition of the mixed-methods approach, such an approach is deemed to be best suited for this study.

In a quantitative approach, 100 teachers participated in this study and completed the questionnaires. In a qualitative approach, 10 of them involved in the follow-up interviews to seek in-depth information in particular issues. In this design, the questionnaire was first administered to gather and analyse quantitative data, then a follow-up interview was conducted to help elaborate on qualitative data. In terms of the questionnaire, one of the attractions of using a questionnaire is that it is comparatively low-cost and practical for a large sample to report about themselves, and helps reduce the lack of validity and reliability, or measurement error (Mackey & Gass, 2015). However, according to Bartels (2002), conducting the questionnaire per se could fail to provide reliable answers, as the participants can have a cursory glance at the questionnaire and do it hastily. To counteract its limitations, Dörnyei (2007) recommends that a semi-structured interview is greatly important to complement the quantitative method. Semi-structured interviews allow the interviewees to dilate on the investigated issues with a set of prepared questions, and to probe and explore responses in more depth (Dörnyei, 2007). In terms of its advantages, a semi-structured

interview is more invasive than a questionnaire, can clarify misunderstanding, allows questioning to explore issues and provides rich data (Mackey & Gass, 2015; Newby, 2010). Despite its advantages, it is comparatively time-consuming and high-cost (Newby, 2010).

Following the mixed-methods research approach could provide advantages of both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative approach helped to obtain preliminary and overall information on perceptions, while the qualitative approach sought deeper information according to the issues in research questions. To answer the research questions, the combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods helped to obtain an in-depth understanding of the particular issue concerned and to enhance the completeness of description (Mackey & Gass, 2015; Xerri, 2017). The follow-up interviews can be effective to augment and complement the findings from the questionnaire successfully. This research design helped to address the research question, ensure the validation of this research, and confirm the findings. Overall, the research design of this study is illustrated in Figure 1.

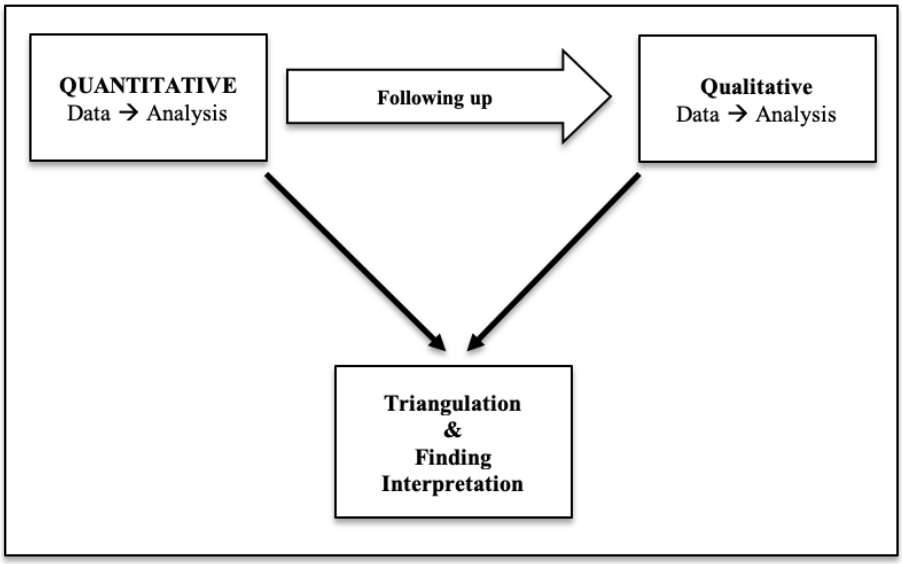

Figure 1: Research Design

Participants

In this study, participants were 100 Thai EFL teachers who taught at the upper secondary school level from schools all over Thailand in Academic Year 2019/2020. There were 18 schools in this study.

In a quantitative method, 100 Thai EFL teachers completed the questionnaire. They were selected by stratified random sampling to get more accurate results than only from one type of participants. The stratum was the school averages scores of the English test in the O-NET.

- **Group 1:** Fifty teachers were randomly chosen from schools whose score was higher than the national average score;
- **Group 2:** Fifty teachers were randomly chosen from schools whose score was lower than the national average score.

In a qualitative method, 10 teachers were selected purposively from the ones who had previously responded to the questionnaires and were willing to take part in a semi-structured interview. Concerning the number, five teachers from each group of the stratum were chosen. purposive sampling is “the deliberate choice of a participant due to the qualities the

participant possesses" (Etikan, Musa, & Alkassim, 2016, p. 2). To elaborate on the qualities, teachers who showed strong attitudes on both sides towards the test were selected.

Research Instruments

Questionnaire

The questionnaire based on teachers' beliefs consisted of 4-point Likert scale items (*strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* without a neutral option) to force respondents to decide one side or another of beliefs. The questionnaire items were adopted from the previous washback studies that match and suit the Thai context. The questionnaire was constructed and adopted based on the factors identified by Spratt (2005). The areas affected by washback proposed by Spratt (2005) include curriculum, materials, teaching methods, and feeling and attitudes.

Moreover, several research studies about washback on teaching (e.g. Amengual-Pizarro, 2010; Di Gennaro, 2017; Kiliçkaya, 2016) and research studies related to the O-NET (e.g. Lunrasri, 2014; Sommit, 2009) to help construct the statements in the questionnaire that matched with the research question and suited with Thai context. Although the items adopted from other studies were designed from other tests, all items were chosen based on the test type (high-stakes standardised test) and test usage (assessing students' learning achievement or being used for university entry), which is similar to the O-NET.

Semi-structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview consisted of questions to elicit teachers' self-report on their beliefs towards the English test in the O-NET. The reason for using the semi-structured type is that it offered the balance between flexibility and the focus on the topic. The interview was conducted in Thai to avoid misunderstanding and ambiguity. Here are some of the interview questions:

1. What do you think about the English test in the O-NET?
2. How does the English O-NET test have an impact on you?
3. If you did not teach test techniques or how to do the test well, what would it affect your students?
4. If you could change the way the O-NET tests, what/how would you change?

Validity and Reliability of Research Instruments

A pilot study is generally conducted on a small scale prior to a prospective project. According to Mackey and Gass (2015), a pilot study is used to "test, revise and then finalise the aspects of a research project to allow necessary adjustments before the final commitment to the main research project" (p. 43). Before a pilot study, the questionnaire and interview questions were validated and cross-checked by three experts in the field of language assessment. Then the questionnaire statements and interview questions were translated into Thai with the help of four translators who specialise in English-Thai translation.

The questionnaire was in a Thai version to avoid the misunderstanding and erroneous interpretation of the statements in the questionnaire and the interview. The pilot study was administered with the pilot group of 18 Thai EFL teachers to ensure the clarity and reliability of the questions in the questionnaire and the interview for its effective practice in the actual data collection.

Concerning the reliability, Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha was used with the questionnaire. Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha is one of the most widely used measures of the reliability of the research instruments (Bonett & Wright, 2015). The results revealed that the reliability of the questionnaire was 0.884. To be appropriate and acceptable in terms of reliability, "the value of Cronbach's coefficient alpha should be more than 0.7" (Taber, 2018, p. 1277). The results of the pilot study yielded high internal reliability; hence the was

acceptable. Concerning the pilot study of the interview, the aim was to assure the correctness of the questions and to reduce the confusion and ambiguity raised in the interview questions among the interviewees.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data were collected in the first semester of the academic year 2019. There were 18 schools involved in this study. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about their confidentiality and anonymity. Also, they must consent to take part in the study before the researcher could collect data. The participants were asked to indicate the degree of their agreement and disagreement with each statement.

For quantitative analysis, to make it easier to interpret, the level of agreement (strongly agree and agree) and disagreement (disagree and strongly disagree) were grouped together. Therefore, two groups of responses were illustrated: agree and disagree. Moreover, numeric data such as percentages, mean, mode and median were used for the descriptive statistical analysis. Furthermore, the mode indicates, which scale was selected most in each item, while the median indicates, which scale is the middle value when all frequencies of scales were sorted. Moreover, the mean scores of each statement in the questionnaire were interpreted as follows:

3.26 – 4.00 means “strongly agree”.
2.51 – 3.25 means “agree”.
1.76 – 2.50 means “disagree”.
1.00 – 1.75 means “strongly disagree”.

For qualitative analysis, content analysis was implemented by reading transcriptions several times and then developing the themes arisen from the transcription. There was one main theme with two sub-themes in this present study, as discussed in the results section. The theme was described and key findings were summarised by using content analysis. According to Newby (2010), content analysis is “a set of procedures that is applied to message medium to identify what is being communicated” (p. 484).

Finally, data from both quantitative and qualitative analysis were synthesised and merged into one overall interpretation.

Results

As the data was compiled through a mixed-methods approach, both quantitative and qualitative data were triangulated and reported as shown in Figure 1. In this section, both questionnaire and interview data are compared, integrated and interpreted based on themes. The data from the questionnaire is presented and analysed in tables. The one main theme and two subthemes reported in this section are:

- Beliefs about the National Examination
    - Attitudes towards the English O-NET
    - Teachers’ beliefs about the English O-NET

Beliefs about the National Examination

Attitudes towards the English O-NET

Table 2: Results from Beliefs about the National Examination

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Mode	Median	Interpretation
The O-NET is a good indicator of students' ability in using language in real-life situation.	13%	18%	42%	27%	2.17	2	2	Disagree
I am satisfied with the English O-NET.	7%	31%	44%	18%	2.27	2	2	Disagree
I think the content in the O-NET is not aligned with the Basic Core Curriculum.	14%	48%	32%	6%	2.70	3	3	Agree
The O-NET is appropriate but it needs to include other aspects such as: listening, speaking, and writing.	28%	51%	17%	4%	3.03	3	3	Agree

As shown in Table 2, 69% of the 100 teachers disagreed with the statement that the O-NET was a good indicator of students' ability in using language in real-life situations. Concerning modes and median, the scale 'disagree' was chosen most in this item. Moreover, most teachers (62%) were not satisfied with the O-NET, while 38% of the teachers were still satisfied with the test. Therefore, the scale 'disagree', which means being dissatisfied, was also chosen the most in this item. As regards content, surprisingly, 62% of teachers thought that the content in the O-NET was not aligned with the Basic Education Core Curriculum, whose indicators were covered to construct the test. Interestingly, the scale 'agree' was selected most in this item. Moreover, the majority of teachers (79%) found the O-NET appropriate but saw the need for other skills to be included the test.

The above finding was reflected by eliciting from the interviewees. The question "What do you think about the English test in the O-NET?" was asked to the interviewees. In the follow-up interview, most teachers reported that the test was too difficult for the students. For example, one teacher from group 2 (schools whose school average O-NET scores were lower than the national average score) stated:

> *"I am not really satisfied with the content on the O-NET. Some indicators test way deeper knowledge and that makes the test way too difficult for students. It is not a good indicator of students' ability or performance at all. The test does not actually test four skills of language, so it does not align with the goal of teaching English stated in the Basic Education Core Curriculum."*
>
> (Teacher A)

However, some teachers from schools whose mean scores were higher than the national mean scores had some different points of view, as Teacher B stated:

> *"I am quite satisfied with the test items on the O-NET. Everything on the O-NET has already been taught and is not too difficult. I am pretty sure that my students could do it well if they paid attention to what I taught in class. […] However, I think the O-NET does not really align well with the Basic Education Core Curriculum. I think the contents in the test are somehow more than what is stated in the Basic Education Core Curriculum."*
>
> (Teacher B)

Interestingly, although Teacher B disagreed with Teacher A and explained that the O-NET was not too difficult and her students could do very well, both teachers agreed that the O-NET was not aligned well with the Basic Education Core Curriculum.

Teachers' beliefs about the English O-NET

Table 3: Results from the English O-NET and How Teachers Teach

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	Mode	Median	Interpretation
Teaching to the test helps to raise students' test scores.	25%	39%	25%	11%	2.78	3	3	Agree
I feel pressure from my school principal to improve my students' test scores.	28%	43%	17%	12%	2.87	3	3	Agree
I think the period of academic year cannot cover every content from the curriculum.	12%	50%	34%	4%	2.70	3	3	Agree
I feel that I am driven by the test rather than the textbook or curriculum.	11%	41%	38%	10%	2.53	3	3	Agree
I would still use the same teaching methods if there was no O-NET.	33%	46%	16%	5%	3.07	3	3	Agree

Interestingly, Table 3 shows that 71% of the 100 teachers felt pressure from their school principals to help improve their students' O-NET scores. However, most teachers (62%) believed that they could not cover all content from the curriculum in a period of an academic year, while 38% of the teachers believed that they could. Feeling pressure to help students achieve high scores, almost two-thirds of the teachers (64%) thought that teaching to the test can help to raise their students' O-NET scores. 52% of teachers felt that they were driven by the test rather than textbooks or the curriculum. However, what stands out in this table is that the majority of them (79%) would still use the same teaching methods if there was no O-NET.

Consequently, Teacher F (from the higher average score group) affirmed in the follow-up interview that her teaching methods would not change because she found how she taught suitable for the class consisting a large number of students, as she said:

> *"I do not think that my teaching practices would change. I still follow the school textbooks and try to cover what is important like I used to do in the past. Focusing on grammar and vocabulary rather than communicative activities is good for a big class size because it is easy for me to teach as well as my students to learn in an attempt to cover all the content within a limited time."*
>
> (Teacher F)

Moreover, the majority of teachers also reported that most teachers in their schools got pressure from their school principals to teach their students to get as high score as students could because it is about school reputation and accountability. For example, one teacher (from the lower average score group) stated:

> *"In Term 2, our school needs to get students prepared and ready for the O-NET especially in Grade 12. Teachers are asked and required to teach students to help them get as high score as they can. In that short period, what teachers could do is to use the old test papers from the previous years to teach in the class. Students will be taught some techniques to dot the test."*
>
> (Teacher C)

In addition, some teachers commented that the O-NET test made them ignore communicative language, which is considered as the goal of English language teaching in Thailand, as one teacher (from the lower average score group) said:

> *"What I need to teach in preparing students for the O-NET is grammar and vocabulary. Teaching communicative language would not help students to tackle the O-NET. If students know a number of rules and vocabulary, they will get high scores in the O-NET. Clearly, the O-NET made my have to teach students memorisation or rote-learning, which contrasts with the goal of English language teaching."*
>
> (Teacher A)

The presented findings have pointed out that there were clear washback effects of the English test on teachers. In respect of teachers' perceptions of the O-NET, most teachers thought that the O-NET was not a good indicator of students' ability in using language in real-life situations, and were not satisfied with the test because it was not aligned well with the Basic Education Core Curriculum. However, the majority of teachers reported that the test still had an impact on their teaching practices.

Discussion and Implications

Regarding the perceived importance of the English test in the national examination, which is a high-stakes examination, unsurprisingly, teachers considered the O-NET as an important test for them, although they were not satisfied with the test. As reported by most teachers in the findings, they did not see the O-NET as a good indicator of students' ability to use the English language in real-life situations and it was not well aligned with the Basic Education Core Curriculum. In terms of using English in real-life situations, Choomthong (2014) and Prapaisit de Segovia and Hardison (2009) asserted that, overall, Thai students fail to have enough experience with using English in real-life situations outside the classroom, resulting in a gap in educational policies and actual practices in the classroom. Moreover, the interview results particularly suggested that the contents of the English O-NET were somehow more

than what was indicated in the Basic Education Core Curriculum. This result corroborates the findings of Nipakornkitti and Adunyarittigun's (2018) study on the content validity of the English O-NET for the upper secondary level, using the test-curriculum alignment method with five participants to match the test items with the Basic Education Core Curriculum. This indicated that the O-NET at the upper secondary school level is only partially aligned with the Basic Education Core Curriculum and cannot simply measure the communicative skills through indirect testing.

Moreover, the findings revealed that the majority of teachers found the O-NET appropriate but said it needed to include other aspects of skills such as listening, speaking and writing. Interestingly, most teachers reported that the test made them focus mainly on grammar and vocabulary rather than communicative language because students' communicative skills were not tested. These results are in line with Mahmoudi and Bakar's (2013) study revealing that the test should have different types of questions and include other skills so teachers would avoid focusing on students' rote-memorisation skills. These findings are also in line with Tayeb's (2014) study, investigating the washback effect of the high-stakes English exit test for secondary school students on teaching and learning in Yemen through a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview, which revealed that the national examination made the teachers tend to teach only what was relevant to the test and encouraged them to focus on rote-learning of grammar and vocabulary. Clearly, these findings reflect particularly some of Alderson and Wall's (1993) hypotheses, namely "the tests influence 'what' teachers teach and the tests influence 'how' teachers teach" (p. 120).

The teachers' declared attitudes towards the O-NET in this study seemed comparatively different from other washback studies. For instance, Watanabe (2000), who explored the washback effects of the University Entrance Examination of English on teachers in Japan, suggested that teachers could have mixed feelings but mostly exhibited positive reactions. However, the present study shows that although teachers had mixed attitudes, the majority of the attitudes were relatively negative. This discrepancy may be explained by the teachers' perceptions of the quality and composition of the test, as discussed in the first paragraph. This finding is in line with Onaiba and Mustafa's (2014) findings regarding investigating how English teachers in Libya were influenced by a reformed EFL public examination. Their study indicated that teachers had mixed but generally negative attitudes due to the quality of the test. Furthermore, Amengual-Pizarro (2010), investigating the washback effects of the University Entrance Examination of English on teachers in Spain, revealed that the high-stakes test influenced classroom methodology, as the teachers made use of the test imitation and ignored what was not being tested. According to Shih (2009), the attitudes and perceptions of the participants towards the tests are important, as they affect the results that are to be used to determine the washback effects. Accordingly, this present study suggests the possibility that this test, though widely considered as a poor one, would probably have negative washback effects.

Moreover, other important findings revealed that teachers believed that in accordance with the test format could help raise their students' test scores. Their teachings were highly driven by the test, as they felt pressurised by the school principals who instructed them to focus on improving students' scores in favour of the league tables system. These results corroborate the findings of several earlier studies (e.g., Al Amin & Greenwood, 2018; Gashaye, 2012), revealing that teachers agreed that arranging mock tests for students and teaching to the test will help them achieve good marks in an examination. This result may be explained by the fact that the NIETS provides the old test papers to be downloaded online now (NIETS, 2019) so that teachers nowadays could get access to the tests more easily, and the process of the university entry, which used the O-NET as one of the criteria, has become highly competitive (Padermprach, 2017).

Furthermore, the finding revealed that teachers were likely to come under pressure from school principals to assist students in achieving higher scores. This is against the goal of English language teaching, which aims at improving students' abilities to use English and build communicative competence, as stated in the national curriculum. Another interesting finding is that teachers wanted to conduct communicative activities for their students, but they faced some difficulties to implement such activities such as time allotment, class size, and student expectation. This finding broadly supports the work of Spratt (2005), demonstrating that one of the factors influencing the washback on the curriculum is class time allocation and class size. A possible explanation for this might be the contextual factors, as mentioned in *Teachers' Beliefs* subsection.

Taken together, the results and discussion from this study provide insights for some implications. For EFL teachers, emphasis should be placed on everyday communication in the real-life situations including increasing linguistic knowledge, encouraging students to expose themselves to English, and aiming at establishing meaningful and authentic English learning environments to their students to promote the goal of English language teaching. Significantly, attending teaching workshops or conferences can allow teachers to improve language skills and learn more about teaching methods and techniques, as it can be plausible to believe "that teachers with poor English language proficiency are less likely to employ teaching activities that demand levels of communicative language ability", which hinders the attainment of the goal of English language teaching (Kiomrs, Abdolmehdi, & Rashidi, 2011, p. 160). In addition, it is important to be acknowledged that the tremendous power to lead students to learn and to teach them a target language is determined by teachers' beliefs as what and how teachers teach is not dictated by the exams itself but their beliefs (Pan, 2009; Spratt, 2005). Moreover, teachers should carefully look at the curriculum in order to plan for their lessons, so that their teaching or lessons could follow, cover and align with the Basic Education Core Curriculum.

For school principals, not too much pressure should be placed on teachers, but they should be motivated and encouraged to enhance students' learning towards the attainment of the goal of English language teaching. Moreover, as suggested by Wall and Horák (2006), schools should offer teachers sufficient professional development training or workshops that allows teachers to learn and share ideas about updated and different methods and techniques, such as organising in-house training or encouraging teachers to participate in national or international conferences. Furthermore, school principals should organise the workshop that promotes the idea of Teacher Assessment Literacy of their teachers, because appropriate knowledge of testing and assessment can hamper negative washback on teachers' teaching and students' learning (Kiomrs *et al.*, 2011). Importantly, using tests to achieve educational goals can promote positive washback. However, if the school principals use such tests to get power and create anxiety among teachers and students, negative washback can evolve (Ahmad & Rao, 2012).

For test developers, the insights gained from this study may be of assistance to reconsider and develop the test that matches well with the national curriculum, for example, the performance tests that focus on productive skills. As suggested by Nipakornkitti and Adunyarittigun (2018), the O-NET tests should be developed to cover full domains of the Basic Education Core Curriculum for a higher degree of content validity. Aligning the test to all domains of the curriculum is likely to provide teachers and students with better opportunities to teach and learn English (Abdulhamid, 2019). Moreover, it is crucial that test developers develop a test theoretically based on the five cardinal principles of language assessment by Brown and Abeywickrama (2010). Ultimately, the research results can be presented to stakeholders in the O-NET examination so that they realise the problems and help to improve O-NET preparation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The aim of this investigation was to explore what Thai EFL teachers at the upper secondary school level's perceptions of the English O-NET. The present study revealed that the majority of teachers were not satisfied with the O-NET, although they did consider it to be an important test. The second major finding reported by the majority of teachers believed that the test was an inadequate indicator of student ability to use English in real-life situations. Interestingly, the teachers indicated that the test content was badly aligned with the national curriculum. Despite its low content validity, the teachers surprisingly remained driven by the test and taught to the test by mainly focusing on the content that would be on the test. The reason for such practices is that the teachers were under pressure to do so from other stakeholders such as students and school principals. On reflection, the teachers suggested that the test should include other aspects of language skills, such as listening, speaking, and writing, in order to avoid dependence on rote-learning and memorisation. This study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of how Thai EFL teachers at the upper secondary school level perceive the English O-NET. Furthermore, the findings from this study may provide a basis for improving English language teaching and testing in Thailand.

It is important, however, to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Firstly, the number of participants is quite small, so the generalisability of these results is subject to certain limitations and therefore cannot represent all Thai EFL teachers. It is hoped that readers will be able to relate the findings to their own contexts. Secondly, this study conducted data collection only via questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, which may encounter the following issues: a self-report method could cause a social desirability bias in which the respondents tend to inaccurately report, presenting a favourable image of themselves to gain social acceptance (Nederhof, 1985), whereas interviewees might be influenced by a 'halo effects' and a social desirability bias by which the interviewees may report what they believe to be approving and favourable. To fill such gaps, alternative methods of data collection, such as observations and document analysis, should be considered.

About the Author

Pariwat Imsa-ard: a university lecturer in the field of English Language Teaching at a public university in Thailand. He holds M.A. in TESOL with merit from the University of York, United Kingdom. Prior to his M.A., he obtained B.Ed. in Non-Formal Education and English with second-class honours from Chulalongkorn University, Thailand. His research interests include language assessment, ELT methodology, and EFL teacher education.

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