

Teacher Factors as a Mediator between Teaching and Testing at the Higher Education Level

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Article information	Abstract
<p>Article history: Received: 23 Oct 2023 Accepted: 16 Sep 2024 Available online: 30 Sep 2024</p> <p>Keywords: Washback effects Teacher factors Assessment literacy High-stakes tests</p>	<p><i>The washback effects of high-stakes tests have become conspicuous and prevalent in Thai educational contexts. Yet, researchers in language assessment still have much to strive towards to understand the nuanced role of teacher factors as a mediator between the washback effects of high-stakes tests and teaching. This study aimed to investigate how teacher factors mediated between the Srinakharinwirot University Standardized English Test (SWU-SET), an exit examination for undergraduate students at a Thai public university in Thailand, and teaching. A mixed-methods design was implemented in this study. The researchers asked 25 full-time university teachers to complete a questionnaire, and five of them were purposively selected to be the informants for an interview and reflective journals. Descriptive statistics and content analysis were employed for data analysis. The main findings revealed that teacher factors (i.e., knowledge, beliefs, and experience) mediated between the SWU-SET and teaching. A smorgasbord of teacher knowledge of such tests and assessment literacy, beliefs in test writer integrity and professionalism, and experience in test development and taking tests could help induce the intended washback. Finally, this study also proposed a model of mediating factors and the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching to help stakeholders make informed decisions on teaching.</i></p>

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, a number of studies on high-stakes tests (i.e., Ali & Hamid, 2020; Rahman, et al., 2023; Shih, 2009; Watanabe, 2004) have revealed factors leading to washback effects on teaching, two of which are test factors and teacher factors. Test factors are attributes of a test that affect what washback effects look like. Test factors such as test stakes (Hughes, 2003), test format (Rahman et al., 2021), and tested skills (Pizarro, 2010) have been found to drive teaching. For example, the prevalent use of the multiple-choice format in high-stakes tests drives teachers to overlook the significance of teaching productive skills in the classroom because they are not directly tested (Davies et al., 1999). In fact, it is believed that good tests lead to good teaching, whereas bad tests do the opposite (Messick, 1996).

When considering teacher factors, there is no doubt that teachers are instrumental in navigating student's learning. Teachers' decision-making and efforts in creating learning environments in accordance with the assessment process are greatly significant in inducing intended washback (Chinda et al., 2022). For example, teachers make use of test results to plan instruction with the goal of improving students' English proficiency (Pan & Newfields, 2012). It is obvious that teacher factors may outweigh test factors in inducing intended washback effects on teaching (Watanabe, 1996).

At higher education institutions in Thailand, exit examinations have been implemented as part of graduation requirements in some institutions. Graduates should have taken a standardized test (e.g., TOEIC, IELTS or TOEFL) or an institutional test and should have achieved B2 level of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or CEFR, as a measure of their English proficiency (Ministry of Education, 2014). Since the CEFR provides 'CAN DO' descriptors of proficiency (Council of Europe, 2020), any institutional tests which align with the CEFR and are used as exit examinations can offer students a shared roadmap for learning and be used to suggest appropriate teaching approaches for teachers.

The existence of washback effects on teaching have become prevalent and noticeable (Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun, 2022), and of course, teacher factors mediating between tests and teaching have significantly come into play. To date, there has been a relative dearth of research investigating teacher factors mediating between testing and teaching in Thai educational contexts, especially at the higher education level. Therefore, there is a need for a nuanced conceptual understanding of the role of teacher factors as a mediator between the washback effects of a high-stakes test at the higher education level in Thailand and teaching. In order to fill this gap, this study aimed to investigate how teacher factors mediated between the Srinakharinwirot University Standardized English Test (SWU-SET) (an exit examination) and teaching. The guiding research question was as follows: How do teacher factors mediate between the washback effects of the SWU-SET and teaching? The findings of this study will benefit English language teachers in Thai educational contexts, as well as those in similar contexts, by showing how teacher factors mediate between tests and teaching to promote intended washback effects.

WASHBACK AND TEACHER FACTORS

Tests can have impacts or effects on individuals, policies, and practices within schools, educational systems or society (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Tsagari & Cheng, 2017). In particular, washback is considered as an aspect of test impact (Tsagari & Cheng, 2017), especially in large-scale and high-stakes tests, and it refers to the effects of tests or assessments on teaching and learning in classroom settings (Wall & Alderson, 1993).

Over the past two decades, washback studies have shown that tests have either intended or unintended effects on teachers' attitudes and behaviors towards language teaching (Imsa-ard, 2020; Rahman, et al., 2023; Watanabe, 2004). Any tests leading to intended or positive washback effects on teaching could be considered beneficial in encouraging appropriate teaching practices. Tests influence teachers to reconsider and make necessary modifications

to their teaching methods (Khan et al., 2023), lesson planning (Muñor & Álvarez, 2010), and the use of teaching materials (Wang et al., 2014). This modification allows teachers to establish a better connection between educational goals, teaching, learning, and assessment. On the other hand, the unintended or negative washback effects of tests on teaching lead teachers to overemphasize tested content and skills. Teachers are likely to specifically teach content or skills that will be tested in the tests (Kılıçkaya, 2016; Rahman et al., 2021) and skip some lessons in the textbooks to prepare students for the test. Many studies have found that tests lead teachers to ignore the teaching of productive skills (Rind & Mari, 2019) or present target structures to students in decontextualized sentences (Zatouli, 2024). As a result, the discrepancy between teaching, learning, and assessment has hindered teachers' understanding of the curriculum, their ability to develop innovative teaching methods, and their focus on students' communicative competence.

In washback studies, teacher factors provide more explanations of how teaching and testing contribute to washback effects. There are a wide range of teacher factors that have been investigated to assess their direct or indirect association with the degree of washback effects between tests and teaching (Shih, 2009; Wang, 2010; Watanabe, 2004). Interestingly, washback studies have shown recurring themes of teacher factors inducing intended washback effects on teaching. These include teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and experience. Teacher knowledge, such as familiarity with a range of teaching methods (Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun, 2022; Watanabe, 2004), pedagogical knowledge (Wang, 2010), knowledge of tests (Muñoz & Álvarez, 2010; Shih, 2009), and assessment literacy (Rahman et al., 2021), plays an important role in designing instruction. To explain, teachers with sufficient knowledge can bridge the gaps between teaching and test preparation, so they become mindful that they need to adjust their teaching methods to help students achieve their learning goals. Therefore, the relationship between teacher knowledge and practices is an essential attribute of washback on teaching. As teachers play a pivotal role in determining what should be done in classrooms, teacher beliefs, either positive or negative, shape their instruction or what the classroom will be like. Teacher beliefs, a mediator between tests and teaching, reflect teachers' attitudes, interpretations and decisions regarding washback effects and teaching, such as their beliefs of effective teaching and test preparation (Green, 2006), and the perceived quality and importance of tests (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Imsa-ard, 2020). For example, teachers who feel under pressure due to the belief that test scores will affect their salary and promotion will teach test items in order to boost students' test scores (Imsa-ard, 2020). In other words, teachers' negative attitudes towards a test are likely to drive teaching to the test (Canli & Çakir, 2022). Apart from the above teacher factors, teacher experience, such as years of teaching, training, learning experience, or educational background, helps teachers make a connection between assessment and teaching. Teachers are likely to teach students in the same way they were taught (Burrows, 2004). However, teachers who participate in ongoing teacher training become aware of the connections between course objectives and test objectives. This type of support enables them to gain more knowledge and change their perceptions (Wang, 2010). For example, teachers who have sufficient training and guidance will be more open to test effects, leading them to align their teaching practices with task characteristics or criteria (Turner, 2009). Therefore, it can be concluded that teacher factors play a pivotal role as a mediator between teachers' decision-making and practice to induce washback effects on teaching.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To investigate how teacher factors mediate washback effects, this study employed a mixed-methods research design. The strengths of both quantitative and qualitative methods helped the researchers understand how teacher factors mediated between the SWU-SET and teaching.

Participants

In this study, the participants were 25 full-time teachers who were teaching English at a public university in Bangkok, Thailand. All of them were responsible for teaching foundation English courses, designing the course syllabi, and developing the examinations for the courses. They had educational backgrounds in education, intercultural communication, or linguistics. Of those teachers, 10 of them were Ph.D. holders, while 15 had received a master's degree. They had at least 5 years of teaching experience at the college level and also taught the same foundation English courses, which stressed developing communicative competence. Additionally, they were all the test writers of the SWU-SET who had participated in the test development procedures in 2016. That is why they understood various aspects of the SWU-SET, including tested skills, test format, and the underlying concepts of the test. It was clear that they had taken on the dual role of teacher and test writer. All of the participants completed the questionnaire. The researchers used purposive sampling to select five participants to be the informants. These informants' qualifications met our selection criterion. They had at least 5 years of teaching experience at the college level, had received training on test development, and had played a role in developing the SWU-SET.

The SWU-SET and the exit examination requirement

The SWU-SET, a paper-based test implemented as the exit examination for undergraduate students at Srinakharinwirot University, is aimed at measuring students' English proficiency. Based on university policy, the test score of the SWU-SET is considered as a part of the graduation requirement, so it has become a high-stakes test in the institution. Its effects could be linked to students' learning and teachers' teaching. Students of SWU are required to take the SWU-SET twice: the first time when they are first-year students, and the second when they are third-year students. To meet the graduation requirement, they are required to get a minimum score of 78 out of 100 (equivalent to the B2 level). Alternatively, undergraduate students can submit a test score from one of the following standardized tests: TOEFL iBT, TOEFL ITP, TOEFL CBT, TOEIC, or IELTS. If their test results do not meet the minimum requirement when they are fourth-year students, they must enroll in the SWU300 Developmental English course, an English remedial course.

The test described in this study, the SWU-SET, was developed from the descriptors of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and mapped onto the CEFR in 2016. The test consists of five parts: listening, vocabulary, structure, functional language and usage, and reading in a multiple-choice format with four alternatives. There are 20 test items in each part, with a total score of 100. The test duration is 3 hours. Scores obtained from the SWU-SET are classified according to the CEFR scale, ranging from the A2 to B2 level (Athiworakun & Wudthayagorn, 2018).

Classroom context

This study aimed to investigate how teacher factors mediated between the washback effects of the SWU-SET and teaching. The following description of the classroom context is provided to help readers understand the nature of the courses and classrooms in this institution. To begin with, the courses were the foundation English courses, namely, SWU121 English for Effective Communication I and SWU122 English for Effective Communication II, which were required courses for first-year students at the institution. In general, both courses emphasized integrated communicative skills. Each weekly class lasted for 3 hours and took place over 15 weeks during the semester. The course objectives, course syllabi, lessons, student assignments, and evaluation methods were designed by the institution. Commercial textbooks were used in these courses; however, the teachers had freedom to design and create supplementary teaching materials. There were 40-50 students in each class. The students could get an exemption from such courses by submitting satisfactory English test results (i.e., SWU-SET, TOEFL, IELTS, or TOEIC results).

Research instruments

To understand the connections between teacher factors and the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching, the following research instruments were employed: a questionnaire, an interview, and reflective journals.

1. Questionnaire

The questionnaire was utilized to elicit the participants' perceptions of teacher factors mediating between the SWU-SET and teaching. The questionnaire items were developed based on Shih's (2009) washback model of teaching and were adapted from the questionnaire items used in the studies of Cheng (2004), Watanabe (2004) and Wang (2010). The total number of questionnaire items was 16 items: teacher knowledge (eight items), teacher beliefs (five items), and teacher experience (three items). The teachers were asked to rate all of the 16 items, which were about teacher factors mediating between the SWU-SET and teaching, using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree; 5 = Strongly Agree). The questionnaire was validated by three experts in the field of language testing and piloted to ensure its reliability before implementation. The questionnaire was administered at the end of the study.

2. Semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview was implemented to elicit in-depth information about the participants' awareness of teacher factors mediating between the SWU-SET and teaching. The interview questions were developed from Shih's (2009) washback model of teaching and adapted from the questions utilized in the studies of Cheng (2004), Watanabe (2004) and Wang (2010). There were 10 questions. The interview questions were validated by three experts in the field of language testing and tried out before implementation. The interviews were conducted at the beginning of the study.

3. Reflective journals

Reflective journals were utilized to learn the teachers' knowledge and beliefs about the SWU-SET and to gain insightful information about the teacher factors mediating between the SWU-SET and teaching. The selected teachers were asked to write two reflective journals in response to prompts: one at the beginning and the other at the end of the study. The first prompt asked the teachers to discuss how familiar they were with the SWU-SET and how their teaching was influenced by such a test. The second prompt asked them to discuss what teacher factors (i.e., knowledge, beliefs, and experience) mediated the washback effects of the test on teaching.

Data collection

At the beginning of the semester, the reflective journal and semi-structured interviews were implemented to elicit teachers' cognitive processes regarding how the teachers were aware of the teacher factors which mediated the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching. At the end of the semester, the teachers were asked to complete the other reflective journal and the questionnaire. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim in Thai. Both the interviews and reflective journals were translated into English for this article and are presented in italics.

Data analysis

The quantitative data were analyzed and are presented in the form of means and standard deviations to illustrate the participants' perceptions of the teacher factors mediating between the SWU-SET and teaching. Content analysis (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017) was used to analyze the qualitative data. We familiarized ourselves with the transcripts by reading them several times and developed the emerging themes. To come up with the themes, we divided the text up into meaning units and condensed meaning units. We developed codes for the condensed meaning units. Right after that, we sorted the codes into themes which answered the research questions. We had several rounds of discussions on the relationships between the themes. After coding, we asked one university teacher with expertise in language testing and another teacher who was familiar with the test to validate the coding scheme. They received training on the coding system, discussed the coding system, asked questions to clarify any unclear points and practiced coding. Then, the two intercoders were asked to code a sample of the transcripts independently. The coded data from the intercoders were compared with those of the first author. When there was any inconsistency, the three coders had a discussion to resolve it. Then, the coded data were compared using Fleiss' kappa and the level of agreement among the three coders was analyzed. The results showed almost perfect agreement, with a kappa value of .896.

FINDINGS

Research question: How do teacher factors mediate between the washback effects of the SWU-SET and teaching?

The findings from the quantitative data reveal teachers' perceptions of the teacher factors, whereas those from the qualitative data show what and how teacher factors mediate between the SWU-SET and teaching.

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and levels of agreement regarding the teacher factors
mediating washback effects on teaching

Teacher factors mediating washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Level</i>
1. My learning experience affects the teaching methodology that I employ in classrooms.	4.31	.80	Strongly Agree
2. My experience with language assessment has influences on my classroom teaching.	4.19	.50	Agree
3. The most effective way to help students pass the SWU-SET is teaching to the test.	4.13	1.00	Agree
4. I believe that my language teaching can help students to be proficient in language learning.	4.13	.60	Agree
5. I believe that the SWU-SET is important only to students' futures.	2.69	.20	Neutral
6. I believe that effective teaching and test preparation will influence my students' English language learning.	4.38	.60	Strongly Agree
7. I want to become familiar with a range of teaching methods to be able to prepare students for the SWU-SET.	4.31	.70	Strongly Agree
8. My English proficiency affects my teaching.	4.31	.70	Strongly Agree
9. Classroom teaching and teachers' levels of proficiency are independent.	3.25	.30	Neutral
10. I find knowledge of language assessment helpful for my teaching.	4.06	.70	Agree
11. Pedagogical knowledge is necessary for my classroom teaching.	4.44	.60	Strongly Agree
12. Linguistic knowledge is important for my classroom teaching.	4.38	.90	Strongly Agree
13. Teaching techniques promote my classroom teaching.	4.69	.50	Strongly Agree
14. Technology promotes my classroom teaching.	4.44	.70	Strongly Agree
15. I need teacher training in the area of testing so that I can connect my teaching and testing.	4.31	.80	Strongly Agree
16. The format of the SWU-SET may lead to negative effects on teaching. For example, the multiple-choice format leads to teaching to the test.	3.31	.80	Neutral

As can be seen in Table 1, the teachers agreed and strongly agreed with most of the statements, showing that teacher factors mediate between the SWU-SET and teaching. The mean scores ranged from 4.06 (*SD* = .70) to 4.69 (*SD* = .50). They strongly agreed that teacher factors, such as teaching techniques (*M* = 4.69, *SD* = .50), pedagogical knowledge (*M* = 4.44, *SD* = .60), technology (*M* = 4.44, *SD* = .70), the belief regarding the influence of effective teaching and test preparation (*M* = 4.38, *SD* = .60), and linguistic knowledge (*M* = 4.38, *SD* = .90), became

mediators between the SWU-SET and teaching. This means that the teachers were aware that these factors—especially teaching techniques, pedagogical knowledge, linguistic knowledge, and technology—induced washback effects from the SWU-SET on their teaching.

The analysis of the qualitative data reveals that three teacher factors are mediators between the SWU-SET and teaching. Those factors are teacher knowledge, teacher beliefs, and teacher experience.

Teacher knowledge

Teacher knowledge in this study refers to substantial knowledge concerning the subject matters, course objectives, and learning outcomes of the courses and assessments that teachers used. The findings from an analysis of the qualitative data brought to light the fact that teacher knowledge consisted of the knowledge of the SWU-SET, the knowledge of the courses they were teaching, and assessment literacy. These aspects became mediators between the washback effects of the SWU-SET and teaching in different ways.

Knowledge of the SWU-SET for lesson planning

Knowledge of the SWU-SET includes the information about the test itself; the underlying concepts of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR); the test specifications, objectives, constructs, and format; and the university regulations regarding the test. The findings showed that the teachers were aware of the importance of the SWU-SET as an exit examination for their students. An analysis of the qualitative data revealed the fact that the knowledge of the SWU-SET facilitated teachers' understanding of what lessons and/or skills needed to be taught to help students develop their English proficiency. The underlying concepts of the CEFR and its descriptors reminded the teachers of the need to nurture communicative competence. They used them as guidelines for teaching essential English skills or strategies, such as listening for main ideas and specific details, understanding language function and expressions, reading for main ideas and specific details, making inferences and recognizing tone of voice. Knowing that students had to take the SWU-SET as a graduation requirement, the teachers incorporated SWU-SET knowledge into their lesson planning and teaching routines to help students achieve the test's goals, as shown in Excerpts 1-2.

Excerpt 1

"The SWU-SET is a standardized test designed specifically for SWU students, so all of my students have to take the test. I know that the SWU-SET focuses on communication, so I try to teach them skills that they can use to improve their communication. For example, their listening skills will be tested, so I teach them how they can identify the main idea or specific details, which enables them to listen to English effectively."

(Teacher 1, teacher reflective journal II)

Excerpt 2

“The benefit of the SWU-SET on my teaching was that I could ask students to focus on learning strategies because I knew what the students would be tested on from the specifications of the SWU-SET.”

(Teacher 3, personal communication)

Excerpts 1-2 illustrate that the teachers utilized knowledge of the SWU-SET for planning lessons and managing the learning aspects which students should learn in English language classes. They were also selective about the materials they used in classrooms. Consequently, their students could improve their language abilities and learning strategies, making them successfully achieve the goals of the SWU-SET.

Foundation English courses knowledge for students' language learning

Knowledge of the foundation English courses refers to the specific information about the English courses or subject matter that teachers taught as well as the lessons which students were expected to study and be tested on. The findings showed that the teachers used their knowledge of the foundation English courses (SWU121 and SWU122) to support students' achievement in learning English. An analysis revealed that knowledge of the foundation English courses included knowledge of the course objectives, content and skills taught, coursebooks and supplementary materials, tests, course syllabi, and course duration. They realized that their primary teaching responsibility was to ensure that their instruction assisted students in language learning and strictly followed the course syllabi. The teachers also reported that they found connections between the content and skills taught in the courses and those tested in the SWU-SET. Consequently, they preferred to introduce lessons and strategies that would promote students' language learning and prepare them to achieve the goals of the SWU-SET, as shown in Excerpts 3-5.

Excerpt 3

“I knew that I had to teach students in a way which would achieve the course objectives. I wanted them to get good SWU-SET scores. I wanted them to pass the test and gain high test scores. So, whenever I saw connections between what I was teaching and the SWU-SET, I implicitly connected them together.”

(Teacher 2, personal communication)

Excerpt 4

“When I taught foundation English courses, I aimed to develop students' English skills at the B1+ level based on the course objectives and teaching materials. Then, I tried to aim higher, at the B2 level, by adding useful strategies and skills to promote their learning so they could achieve the goals of the SWU-SET.”

(Teacher 5, personal communication)

Excerpt 5

“Although my main responsibility is to teach content and skills based on the course syllabi and teaching materials of SWU121 and SWU122, I also relate the course content to the SWU-SET whenever I see similarities between the course content and the SWU-SET.”

(Teacher 4, teacher reflective journal I)

Excerpts 3-5 reveal that the teachers acknowledged the responsibility attached to the courses they were teaching. They were not required to teach the SWU-SET as it was not the focal point of the courses. However, when they noticed similarities between the skills and content they were teaching and those tested on the SWU-SET, they included such skills and content in their lesson plans to help students learn them.

Language assessment literacy for enhancing teaching quality

Assessment literacy refers to the knowledge, skills, and processes involved in how teachers assess students' learning, interpret assessment results, and use these interpretations in their teaching to help students achieve success. With assessment literacy, the teachers understood the purposes and uses of tests and assessments. They understood how they could assess students based on assessment practices, including formative assessment, summative assessment, diagnostic assessment and self-assessment. They could give constructive feedback to help students learn better. The findings showed that assessment literacy allowed the teachers to determine their teaching methodologies, which were related to different types of assessments, in order to promote students' English proficiency. Specifically, the teachers could use the test results obtained from the SWU-SET to plan their lessons, give proper instruction, motivate students to improve their English skills, utilize alternative types of assessments to promote students' learning and engage students in the classroom, as shown in Excerpts 6-9. Consequently, assessment literacy encouraged the teachers to make decisions on their teaching based on the objectives of the SWU-SET and the foundation English courses.

Excerpt 6

“Without the knowledge of language testing, I may not have understood the expectations regarding the test, the format of the test, or the test specifications which contribute to the test blueprint [the SWU-SET]. With this in mind, we could guide students on how to prepare for the test and even give more information about the test.”

(Teacher 5, teacher reflective journal II)

Excerpt 7

“When teachers measured students' language proficiency before giving instruction in line with the SWU-SET, it helped the teachers realize their students' proficiency and

plan their teaching. We could diagnose what they needed to learn and what lessons we should add into our teaching plan.”

(Teacher 4, personal communication)

Excerpt 8

“I thought that students needed to understand the meaning of their test scores so that they could focus on what they needed to learn or ask for appropriate assistance from their teachers. For example, if they told us that they were not good at a particular skill, we could guide them to help improve that skill.”

(Teacher 1, personal communication)

Excerpt 9

“The SWU-SET is not an achievement test. It is different from final and midterm examinations. I needed to introduce them to the concept of self-assessment through taking the SWU-SET so that they could improve their English skills in the long term.”

(Teacher 2, personal communication)

Excerpts 6-9 illustrate that the teachers incorporated assessment literacy, such as understanding the meaning of test scores and different test types, into their teaching to identify students' weaknesses and determine the most effective teaching methods for their learning.

Teacher beliefs

The findings reveal that the participants, as teachers and test writers, associated a variety of beliefs, orientations, and stances with high-quality teaching. This includes the beliefs about the ethics of being test writers and teachers as well as the beliefs about the influence of effective teaching and test preparation.

Beliefs regarding the ethics of being test writers and teachers

The beliefs about the ethics of being test writers and teachers refers to the morals and stances of teachers who hold the role of test writer and teacher at the same time. As the teachers in this study had a dual role (teacher and test writer), they considered the ethics of being test writers and teachers as significant for their profession. An analysis of the interviews pointed out that the teachers endeavored to balance these roles. Even though they had a clear goal of helping their students improve their English proficiency and pass the SWU-SET, they also strongly believed that teaching the SWU-SET and its specific test items to students was not a good practice. Upholding the professional ethics of being test writers and their effort to promote students' language achievement through classroom activities were obvious, as can be seen in Excerpts 10-11.

Excerpt 10

"When I taught students how to do exercises in classrooms, I would explain what keywords they could notice. I was aware that I should not teach to the test. This upholds the ethics of being a test writer. I was aware of the ethical guidelines because I was one of the test writers. We could tell them the importance of the test and teach them English skills through classroom activities, but it would have been unethical to tell them what the questions were."

(Teacher 3, personal communication)

Excerpt 11

"When students asked me what words they would see in the SWU-SET, I didn't think it would be a good idea to tell them. I could only tell them to find lists of vocabulary from the Internet. Sometimes, my students told me that they could not find any. I would find some lists that would be helpful for them, but I would not tell them what exact words to study. It would be unethical for a test writer to do that."

(Teacher 2, personal communication)

Beliefs regarding effective teaching and test preparation

The beliefs regarding effective teaching and test preparation include the conceptions of and stances on applying appropriate teaching methods to promote students' English skills and help students achieve the goals of the SWU-SET. An analysis of the qualitative data revealed that beliefs about effective teaching and test preparation made the teachers aware of the importance of using appropriate teaching methods to reinforce students' learning, eventually helping students handle the SWU-SET questions. Such beliefs consist of familiarizing students with types of questions in the SWU-SET, giving students opportunities to use English in classrooms, providing students with strategies and language practice, and fine-tuning the instruction to match students' English proficiency levels. They assumed that students should be exposed to English as much as possible through language practice and classroom activities. With such beliefs, the teachers assumed that their teaching methods would encourage students to learn English and better prepare them for the SWU-SET, as shown in Excerpts 12-13.

Excerpt 12

"Students will become more proficient if they do a lot of exercises and get a lot of experience in learning English. This will definitely help them pass the SWU-SET."

(Teacher 4, teacher reflective journal II)

Excerpt 13

“When I taught students who were not proficient in English, I would help them by translating some words for them. I did this when preparing students for the SWU-SET. By doing so, they were able to feel positive about learning English. Otherwise, they would have been demotivated from not understanding what they were doing.”

(Teacher 1, personal communication)

Teacher experience

The findings show that teachers’ backgrounds and experience contributed to their teaching routines and the way they prepared students for the SWU-SET. This included the experience as a test developer and the experience as a test taker.

Experience as a test developer

Experience as a test developer refers to a teacher’s involvement in developing the SWU-SET. The findings showed that experience as a test developer allowed the teachers to learn various aspects of language assessment, for example, identifying the test specifications of the SWU-SET, developing the validity and reliability of such a test, and attending training and workshops on test development and ethical issues. The teachers had a lot of opportunities to work as a team in order to build their understanding of the test concepts and discuss them before they could construct test specifications and test items. During the process of test development, this really helped them have clear concepts of test development and positive attitudes towards the test and understand the intentions of the test and the needs of stakeholders. The teachers put a lot of effort into learning and understanding the underlying concepts of the CEFR, which is the backbone of the SWU-SET, its descriptors and the tested skills in the SWU-SET. These experiences were transferred into their teaching. They carried out their lesson plans and raised students’ awareness of the importance of learning English with reference to the expectations of the SWU-SET, as shown in Excerpt 14.

Excerpt 14

“While developing the test specifications of the SWU-SET, my team and I carefully highlighted the descriptors of the CEFR to ensure that we could understand what students could do in English. I used the descriptors to raise students’ awareness about the importance of learning English.”

(Teacher 1, personal communication)

Experience as a test taker

Experience as a test taker refers to a teacher’s past experience preparing to take English tests. The findings revealed that their past experience as test takers was important for preparing

students for the SWU-SET. The teachers suggested techniques and tips for dealing with challenges in taking the test. Interestingly, the findings also uncover the teachers' fully fledged understanding and empathy due to their experiences as test takers. It appeared that the teachers showed understanding and became sympathetic toward students' emotional and psychological states (i.e., stress, anxiety, confusion, etc.) when they had to take the SWU-SET, making the teachers supportive toward the students. The experience became a mediator driving the teachers to motivate the students to constantly improve their English proficiency and to achieve the goals of the SWU-SET, as can be seen in Excerpts 15-16.

Excerpt 15

"My prior experience as a test taker was good for preparing my students because I could tell them about techniques for managing their stress and anxiety, the most frequent questions they would see in the test, and time management."

(Teacher 3, personal communication)

Excerpt 16

"Experience as a test taker: I myself have taken a standardized test, so I can predict how my students feel. As a result, I feel that I should provide them with support."

(Teacher 1, teacher reflective journal II)

DISCUSSION

The findings in this study indicated that three core teacher factors (i.e., knowledge, beliefs, and experience) acted as mediators of the SWU-SET's washback effects on teaching.

First and foremost, the teachers utilized knowledge of the SWU-SET, knowledge of the foundation English courses, and language assessment literacy to induce intended washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching. In particular, knowledge of the SWU-SET, which was developed from the underlying concepts of the CEFR, triggered the teachers' awareness of the importance of communicative competence in English. This affected their decisions and the selection of appropriate teaching methods (Ahmad & Rao, 2024). The teachers also paid attention to learning aspects affecting the test results (Akpınar & Cakildere, 2013). They would focus on tasks similar to what students would be tested on and provided students with opportunities to practice the tested skills in classrooms (Turner, 2009). Since the teachers had a very good grasp of the course objectives and requirements, they had a very clear direction, which meant they could help their students develop their English skills and make progress from the A2 to B2 level by planning their instruction accordingly. Interestingly, it appeared that preparing students to achieve the goals of the SWU-SET did not take precedence over helping students meet the objectives and requirements of the foundation English courses. Without doubt, it is helpful to associate the SWU-SET with the CEFR because the consistency between the objectives

of the test and the courses allows students to have a clear direction in becoming proficient in English. With regard to assessment literacy, it encouraged the teachers to teach better, which led to better quality in students' learning. The teachers understood how to assess what students had learned and could do, interpret the test scores, and use the results to plan and enhance students' effective learning (Webb, 2002). Assessment literacy helps teachers ensure the consistency between the skills taught and tested and tailor a meaningful learning process for their students (Gafforov & Abdulkhay, 2022). As a result, students have more opportunities to achieve their learning goals. The teachers clearly paid attention to developing students' language proficiency rather than simply improving their test scores (Elshawa et al., 2016; Kiomrs et al., 2011).

The findings of this study also proffer the idea that unintended washback effects of a high-stakes test on teaching would definitely occur if the teachers did not have strong integrity as test writers and teachers. The researchers are aware of ethical issues concerning the dual role of the participants (i.e., teacher and test writer). The main responsibility of this group of teachers is teaching foundation English courses and developing students' English skills. In addition, the university assigned the same group of teachers to take charge of developing the SWU-SET. As this dual role is sensitive and linked to ethical concerns, the teachers were required to participate in the orientation of the test development and other workshops. During the orientation for the standard-setting procedure, they were instructed to be aware of ethical considerations for test writers, such as test security and integrity through written agreement. It is very common for teachers to have a strong intention of helping their students improve their English proficiency and achieve the goals of tests (Watson Todd et al., 2021). The dual role of teacher and test writer made the teachers aware of designing instruction which incorporated appropriate teaching methods and created positive learning environments that allowed students to explore language use and communication constantly. As a result, the teachers strongly believed that developing students' English proficiency would result in students' achievement in the high-stakes test. Therefore, they could be confident that their classroom practices were more effective than ever before. Additionally, the teachers in this study showed interest in getting familiar with a range of English language teaching methods and test-wiseness strategies to help their students and prepare them for taking tests effectively (Watanabe, 2004). They showed commitment through their professionalism, professional ethics and integrity. Of greater significance, their students' learning experience became centered on the very heart of language development rather than test scores.

Furthermore, the findings showed that the teachers' experience had a crucial role in shaping the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching. All the teachers involved in the test development processes received training during the standard-setting procedure, which helped them understand their roles and have a clear picture of students' English proficiency. This important provision of training and support for the test writers was done to establish clear guidelines and standards for writing test items (Shi, 2021). That is why their experience as test developers reminded them of the effort they put into understanding the CEFR descriptors, preparing the items, and assembling the test. Teachers who were involved in the test development process perceived and accepted the effects of tests on their teaching, leading to intended washback effects on teaching (Turner, 2009). For example, the teachers transferred their

understanding of the SWU-SET specifications aligned with the CEFR into their lesson planning. This not only helped the teachers to understand the good intentions of the test developers and the expectations of the policy makers but also improved the quality of communicative language teaching. In addition, their experience as test takers made the teachers understand and realize what they needed to do to prepare students for taking the test. The findings unraveled the idea that the teachers needed to support their students intellectually, mentally, and emotionally. In fact, teachers should be aware of students' anxiety related to test preparation and take steps to prevent unnecessary stress (China et al., 2022). That is why the teachers appeared to provide students with tips for dealing with tests, test-taking, and anxiety.

Based on the findings of the current study, we developed a model of factors mediating the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching (see Figure 1).

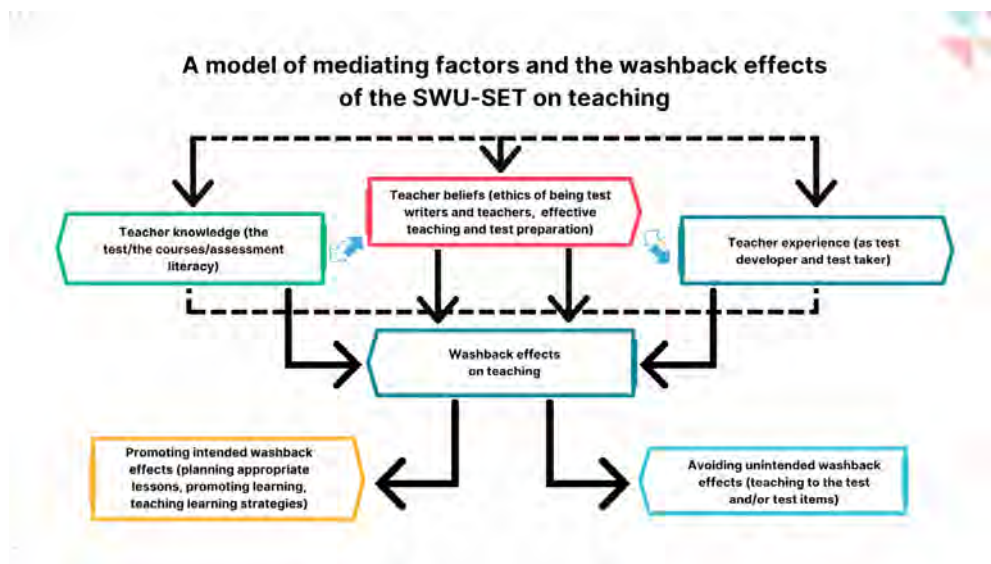


Figure 1 A model of mediating factors and the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching

As can be seen in Figure 1, the findings of the present study illustrate how teacher factors (i.e., knowledge of the test, knowledge of the courses, and assessment literacy), teacher beliefs (including ethics of being test writers and teachers, and views on effective teaching and test preparation), and teacher experience (i.e., experience as a test developer and experience as a test taker) mediate between the washback effects of a high-stakes test and teaching. As the teachers have a dual role, the black lines connecting the factors represent the idea that each teacher factor is interconnected and interplays with each other to induce washback effects on teaching. Meanwhile, the dotted lines represent the idea that each teacher factor is likely to have influences on one another differently, depending on the situation. On top of that, these teacher factors converge upon the washback effects of the test on teaching. Teacher knowledge, beliefs and experience enable teachers to enrich their teaching with a variety of plans and activities, make informed decisions about crucial learning objectives, and teach strategies that promote students' success in language learning, consequently inducing intended washback effects on teaching. High-stakes tests could exert influences upon teaching positively on the condition that teachers are knowledgeable about the test, courses that they are responsible

for, and, importantly, assessment literacy. Teachers should be aware of their role in creating meaningful language learning experiences.

One point worth underscoring is that this model could be applicable to teachers who are not responsible for developing tests. It is a *sine qua non* that teachers uphold ethical standards and possess strong assessment literacy. Under this condition, such teachers would be enabled to avoid the unintended washback of tests on teaching

Understanding of assessment literacy is an important factor that strengthens the knowledge and beliefs of teachers, leading to intended washback effects. It should also be noted that cramming for high test scores could possibly limit students' learning experiences. Teachers should have empathy and provide students with support to make them feel positive towards learning English and feel less stressed about taking the test (Brandmiller et al., 2023).

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study have useful implications for teachers with the intention of inducing the intended washback of a standardized test on teaching.

1. Language assessment literacy is crucial for language teaching and students' learning success.

It is very important for language teachers to be literate in the principles of language assessment (Weideman, 2019), assessment purposes (Brown, 2012), and understanding of test usefulness (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). In many universities where students are required to take a standardized English test as an exit examination for graduation, it is very important for teachers to have a basic understanding of the intended test, including an understanding of the underlying constructs of a standardized test (skills to be measured), the test's characteristics and structure, and the nature of the test items. An understanding of such a test has an impact on test users in a positive way (Li, 2019). Teachers can adeptly integrate test constructs, content, and objectives into their lesson planning to further enhance students' language proficiency (Alderson, 2004; Hughes & Hughes, 2020; Kuang, 2020).

2. Involving teachers in the process of developing tests can motivate them to comply with the ethical standards expected of both teachers and test writers.

As mentioned in the previous item, many universities in Thailand require students to submit a test result from one of the standardized tests, most of which are developed by international organizations. Some studies (e.g., Cheewasukthaworn, 2022; Nakanitanon, 2021) have shown that some universities have developed their own in-house standardized tests to serve the same purpose as the other standardized tests. Teachers should be encouraged to get involved in the test development process. This will be a positive experience for teachers in terms of learning about a specific test, the test's specifications and its usefulness. They will also have opportunities to interact with other teachers, and exchange and share knowledge, experiences, and beliefs in professionalism and ethics in language teaching and assessment practices (Kumaravadivelu, 2003).

LIMITATIONS

It is notable that the time duration of conducting this research became a limitation of this study. Studying washback on different occasions may have led to findings of different intensities of washback on teaching. This study may have captured a snapshot of the washback effects of the SWU-SET, but the washback effects may continue, change, or cease to exist in a different period of time outside the scope of this research. In addition, the findings of this study might have deviated from what the researchers expected because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the classrooms were moved to an online platform, it was inevitable that the teachers would modify their teaching to match the context. Therefore, the findings might differ from what we would have expected in a physical classroom setting.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

1. Consider different groups of teachers whose role is not that of test writer. To have a better understanding of the factors mediating the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching, the researchers would like to suggest increasing the number of teachers in the sample and including a sample of novice teachers. In this study, we have found that three main teacher factors were consistent with the teacher factors in the study of Wang (2010) and Shih's (2009) washback model of teaching, but there are many other factors, such as linguistic knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, teaching techniques, and teachers' English proficiency, which we would like to suggest for future study. Increasing the number of teachers will increase the possibility of finding other teacher factors, leading to a better understanding of the phenomenon. Likewise, inexperienced teachers seem to prefer teaching test-taking skills to language skills as they perceive students' success or failure reflects on them (Alqahtani, 2021). If this is the case, it is worth examining this group of teachers to see their practices in classrooms. The findings of a future study could suggest possible ways those teachers could avoid unintended washback effects on their teaching.

2. Conduct a longitudinal study. Within a certain period of time, this present study has shown three main teacher factors mediating washback effects on teaching. Still, there are other teacher factors to explore regarding washback effects on teaching, such as those studied by Shih (2009), Wang (2010), and Watanabe (2004). Conducting a long-term study on the washback effects of a test could reveal the overall picture of the consistency between teachers' current awareness of the test and changes in their awareness over time. It may also lead to more explanation, reasons, and examples of how teacher factors lead to washback effects on teaching. Such information would be useful for both teachers and policy makers in making informed decisions to induce desirable effects on teaching at the higher education level.

3. Testify the model of this study. Two interesting issues could be further investigated in regard to this model. First, the sample of this study was small and quite unique. Besides teaching, the sample also had the opportunity to be involved in the test development processes of the in-house standardized test. Through this opportunity, they gradually grew their understanding of the expectations of the test developers and the aspects of social

concern, such as ethics and different stakeholder interpretations of test use, leading to their teaching practices. Second, further investigation is needed to determine whether this model could be applied to teachers who do not serve as test developers. As discussed earlier, teachers with strong professional ethics and assessment literacy have a good chance of achieving the intended washback effects of the test on teaching. We suggest that future studies should include a larger group of teachers, focusing specifically on those who have the single role of teaching.

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