



Secondary School Certificate (SSC) Examination: Impact on English Language Learning Strategies in Khyber Pukhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan

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Abstract

The Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination, a mandatory exam taken in English language by Pakistani high school (Grade 10) students, determines students' enrollment in prestigious colleges enabling them to pursue their education in reputable institutions. However, despite obtaining high marks in the SSC exam, students' poor English proficiency hinders their entry into prestigious institutions, questioning the high grades obtained in the exam. This research aimed to investigate the association between the target exam taken in English, and students' exam preparation strategies, that is, how they manage to get high grades with apparently poor English proficiency. The data were collected through structured interviews from purposively selected students (n=30) who achieved more than 90% marks in the examination. The data of the collected interviews were analyzed with thematic analysis. The findings detail that the SSC exam negatively correlated with how the participants studied for the exam. The respondents reported that they primarily crammed material for the exam and reproduced what they were taught in schools. In addition, they believed that well-decorated answer sheets—using colorful pens, effective indentation, and highlighting titles, headings, and subheadings with colorful marks—enabled them to get high marks. The findings further detail that the exam barely engages in the practical application of language and critical thinking skills. The findings raise significant concerns about the reliability and validity of the exam. The findings indicate that the Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education (BISEs) must reassess their assessment methods and procedures to ensure the accurate evaluation of students' linguistic abilities and the transparent reporting of students' true scores to stakeholders. Apart from the disciplinary, local, and national significance, the study also corresponds to Sustainable Development Goal No. 4: Quality Education.

Keywords: Washback, Assessment, SSC Examination, English Language Writing Proficiency

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1. Introduction

In applied linguistics and English Language Teaching (ELT), the concept of assessment refers to various approaches and procedures used by educators to measure and verify students' academic performance, learning progress, skills achievement, and further language learning needs. Washback, the influence of tests and examinations on teaching and learning, is an important area of research in English language

assessment (Damankesh and Babaii, 2015). Examination washback is multifaceted; it impacts individuals' or teachers' practices, teaching methodologies, school policies, institutions, and society. Language assessment provides crucial diagnostic information about students' learning, identifies instructional needs, and recommends teacher interventions (Green 2013). If assessment practices are reliable, authentic, and valid, they facilitate the achievement of learning outcomes thereby positing a positive influence on the teaching-learning process (Alam and Abdullah 2019). The rationale behind exploring this area of research is the poor reputation of the examination boards (BISEs) in Pakistan (Greaney & Hasan, 1998). It is pertinent in the context to explore the influence of the SSC Examination on students' actual performance because it is believed that the results obtained from such examinations and assessments prove to be a poor predictor of a student's actual skills and abilities (Rind & Mari, 2019). The exploration of washback produced by the SSC Examination on students' English language learning, particularly on their writing proficiency is highly important as students most probably join colleges soon after the SSC examination. Most of these students often have poorly developed English language skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking due to the negative influence that Examination casts on students' English language writing proficiency. To have poor English language writing proficiency is highly alarming because it is one of the most important language skills, which is highly necessary for students as poor proficiency may lead to poor performance in future examinations, assignments, and other academic writings. The current research attempted to determine the impact of the SSC examination on the respondents' English writing proficiency and the extent to which the examination accurately measured the learners' linguistic abilities (Damnakesh & Babaii, 2015).

2. Literature Review

This section reviews relevant literature on assessment and washback in the context of English language teaching and assessment. The term 'washback' is used in applied linguistics for the impact produced by language testing on learning and teaching (Damnakesh & Babaii, 2015). The impact includes examinations' effect on students, teachers, teaching methodologies, and policies in the classroom, institutions, and society. Green (2013) employed the term 'backwash' to describe how testing influenced not just the curriculum but also the students' teaching practices and learning styles (Green 2013). Tests and examinations are believed to have two possible outcomes, undesirable effect or desirable positive influence.

Puspitasari (2020) reports that assessment tends to influence the attitudes, behaviours, and motivation of teachers, learners, and parents because examinations often come in the terminating stages of the course; this influence is seen working in a backward direction, hence the term 'washback' (Puspitasari, 2020). The tests can be powerful determiners, both positively and negatively, of what happens in classrooms (Damnakesh & Babaii, 2015). Washback, therefore, is bidirectional. Although the terms washback and backwash are used interchangeably, backwash is better suited to the unintended negative impacts of examination rather than those intended when the examination's primary goal is curriculum control. According to Chen (2013), when a public examination is used as a tool for curriculum change, unexpected and unintended side effects should occur, i.e., both negative and positive influences, because the examination will either facilitate learning or reflect the test requirements (Cheng 2013).

Tests can bring positive, beneficial, and healthy changes in teaching and examinations (Cheng and Curtis 2012). It is reported that a creative and innovative test can efficiently contribute to syllabus modification, and it can even result in the development of a new syllabus. Most academics feel that in positive washback, teachers and students have a good attitude about the exam or test and cooperate willingly and constructively to achieve its goals. However, tests, on the other hand, often tend to negatively influence teaching and learning, known as 'negative washback'. In addition to teaching and learning, examinations have been found to influence the entire curriculum negatively. Stakeholders frequently overlook subjects and activities with no bearing on passing an examination (Soomro and Memon, 2016). As a result, testing harms the curriculum. Hence, most assessment practices often do not promote high-order learning. The empirical evidence reviewed supports almost all the above-mentioned situations (Green 2013).

Dawadi (2019) reports the washback effect of the School Leaving Certificate (SLC) English exam on teaching (Dawadi 2019). The study found the negative washback that the examination produced. The teacher focused just on the objectives of the test instead of focusing on the demands of the curriculum. The activity of listening and speaking was almost ignored because both skills were not supposed to be tested. The course content and teaching were highly unrealistic and not suitable to be used for day-to-day communication. It neither inspired the students to learn nor motivated the teacher to teach. It concluded that teaching for SLC was unavoidable due to the washback the test was expected to have on the student's future. However, whether the teaching towards the test was educationally productive or not relied on the model of the test. The study's findings suggested that introducing a communicative test was not enough to bring changes in the system; a change in the system should have accompanied the test.

Allen (2016) embodies a comprehensive qualitative study of the impact of external testing on elementary schools in the United States (Allen 2016). The study found some harmful and damaging effects. The testing models significantly reduced the time frame for instruction by narrowing curriculum offerings and mode of instruction and severely reduced the capacities and resources. Similarly, a study in Canada on Grade 12 science teachers' independence in curriculum design reported that the teachers believed to have lost much of their autonomy, will, and authority in curriculum decision-making (Green 2013). In the study, the teacher reported how the test constrained and regulated them. Moreover, the students paid attention only to what would be tested. Teaching and learning tasks were limited and confined to those areas of the subject and field of study that were commonly considered to be assessed.

Likewise, Susanti (2014) reproduced the investigation of the undesirable effects of Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) courses taught in an American university (Susanti 2014). The said courses were famous for exerting language teaching. In addition, the courses were blamed for merely distributing scores among the students without providing them with the linguistic tools in a real sense that they needed at a level above the secondary level. The researchers asked the students to rate the TOEFL courses taught. It was evident from the responses of the participants that the attitude of most of the teachers towards TOEFL was negative.

Shohamy (2020) reports on the impact of the Hong Kong Public Examinations Authority's introduction of public examinations (Shohamy 2020). Positive washback was assumed to minimize the gap between the outside world and the classroom. To test the assumption, the researcher adopted observations as a research tool. The sample from 1994 included 1100 students, while 1995 included 600 students. The difference in sample size was attributed to the limitations of the resources. The sample from 1994 used the old examination format, whereas 1995 was taken for the experimental group. The comparative analysis showed that the sample of 1995 used more English than the control group. Likewise, the experimental group preferred coaching clinics, group talks, and language games. With these findings, Cheng (2013) deduced that teaching is chiefly driven by coaching; examinations require memorization and drilling (Cheng 2013). Hence, negative washback was detected due to a considerable increase in memorization and coaching.

In India, Mathew (2012) used the washback model to explore the washback of the Secondary Education Curriculum on teachers' teaching and learning of students (Mathew 2012). The mismatch between the assessment scheme of the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) exam and classroom teaching was due to the existent curriculum. He perceived that the mission of curriculum designers was unable to reflect upon the students from all economic and social setups. In the study, he reported the existence of negative washback on teaching. However, Mathew's study did not directly reflect the washback effect and nature in the context.

Likewise, Ahmad & Rao (2012) studied how examination affected instructors' technique choices in English Language teaching in higher secondary schools (Ahmad and Rao 2012). One hundred twenty-eight high school teachers participated in the research through a purposive sampling technique. Furthermore, the researcher conducted document analysis by examining the contents of prescribed textbooks and test papers. The results showed that teachers preferred traditional ways of teaching, i.e., the Grammar

Translation Method (GTM), to the recommended Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Ahmad and Rao 2012). The teachers' choice of GTM and ignoring CLT was because of the nature and content substance of the exam ahead, which tended to focus on grammar. This was an example of negative washback, negatively affecting teaching techniques and the curriculum. Salehi and Yunus (2012) have shared similar findings and studied the impact of the Entrance Examination of the Universities (EEU) on Iranian high school teachers (Salehi and Yunus 2012). The EEC is a high-stakes selection exam for students seeking to advance to university education. Using stratified sampling, five educational districts in the Iranian city of Isfahan were chosen. The study revealed a heavy focus on reading comprehension and the test format. The test seemed to have a negative washback because the teachers overlooked the communicative approach and preferred the mock examinations.

Divergent results have surfaced from the studies reviewed above. Some of them clearly show that tests affect teaching and learning positively (Röttger, Vetter, and Kowalski 2016); others suggest a negative correlation between tests and teaching (Ahmad and Rao 2012; Salehi and Yunus 2012; Susanti 2014; Mathew 2012). However, despite the findings, all the studies have enough evidence to enlighten policy-making and classroom practices. The diversity of findings, nonetheless, requires further investigation into the examination-driven setting of this research and finding the local solution. Hence, this study investigated how the SSC examination influenced students' preparation for the exam and the extent to which the SSC examination prompted higher-order learning.

3. Research Design

SSC students of BISE Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, who graduated in 2021 were selected as the population of the study because they might not be unnecessarily hesitant to share their views and experiences. As per the Gazette of Pakistan, 63,934 students passed the SSC examination in 2021. Collecting data from the whole population was nearly impossible. The researcher, therefore, delimited data collection to only those students of BISE Mardan who graduated with 90% or more marks in the examination. Non-probability sampling technique was employed in the research. A questionnaire with nine open-ended questions was developed to get the participants' responses. The data collection procedure was completed in four weeks. The data being qualitative and subjected to thematic analysis (Joffe, 2012).

The survey with open-ended questions was distributed among 50 participants and was returned by 26 (52%) students. Of the 26 participants, 10 (38.46%) were males, and 16 (61.53%) were female. Before asking the participants to fill out the questionnaire, the researchers managed to meet the respondents, inform them, and guide them about the survey. The purpose of the research inquiry was explained to them. The survey, which took about forty minutes to one hour to complete, was returned mostly in the second meeting with the participants. Twenty-three participants replied in the presence of their parents/guardians (in the case of female students) and the researcher. Clarification questions if they had any were answered there and then. The researcher asked the participants to proofread and revise their responses (check and verify from the researchers' perspective) to confirm they meant what they wrote in the survey before submission. Three of the participants returned the questionnaire two days after the second meeting.

3.1 Data Processing and Refinement

The data were processed and refined, making it meaningful for expert readers. The answers were transcribed. Errors in words, spelling, and sentences were addressed without disturbing the original sense of the documents. Nothing was added or removed from the data. Two senior English teachers cross-validated the collected data to address and rectify personal errors. The purpose of data refinement was to seek familiarization with the data and finalize it for actual analysis.

3.2 Data Analysis and Results

In qualitative data, thematic analysis involves identifying specific words, topics, or concepts. The thematic analysis allows researchers to quantify and analyze the presence, meanings, and correlations of specific words, themes, or concepts (Almalki, 2016). This research employed thematic analysis to study the

participants' opinions, beliefs, and perceptions regarding how they studied for the said examination. Table 1 below evinces the participants' information and their opinions, views, perceptions, and strategies for coping with the SSC examination and the degree of similarity in the participants' opinions.

There are 6 columns and 27 rows in Table 1. The table includes information regarding the respondents' identity, paper presentation strategy, paper preparation strategy, opinion regarding the tuition academy, and the researcher's remarks regarding the exam's impact.

Table 1. Use of answer sheet, strategy to use the answer sheet, their preparation, and their perception of washback

S/No	S/Name	Paper Presentation	Strategy of Preparation	Students in Favor of Tuition Academy	Washback Produced
01	Student A	Use of colors to impress grader, headings, underlining	To impress the grader along with conceptual study	Agree	Negative
02	Student B	Charming, heading, underlining	Tuition Academy, six hours of study to perform well in the exam	Agree	Negative
03	Student C	-----	Using five years past papers	Agree	Negative
04	Student D	To start, easy questions first, proper headings, good handwriting	Five years of past papers and group study with friends. Working on weak points	Not Agree	Negative
05	Student E	Special care about presentation, good handwriting, and time management	Hard work, extra study in school. Concept clearance	Agree	Negative
06	Student F	Proper headings, father's briefings, good handwriting	Past papers as compulsory, hard study of 7 hours every day	Not Agree	Negative
07	Student G	Coloring, highlighting, headings, diagrams	7 hours presentation oriented study	Not Agree	Negative
08	Student H	Headings, highlighting, and attempting all question	10 hours of study to make more scores, pre-board exams	Not Agree	Negative
09	Student I	Color pens, extra writing, stretching questions, attempting easy ones at first	4 hours of study on a routine basis, more time for Science subjects and less for Arts	Agree	Negative
10	Student J	Attempt easy questions first, headings, some special tricks	Memorizing all subjects thoroughly, four months of memorization	Not Agree	Negative
11	Student K	Color pens, but don't believe in tricks	Systematic, conceptual, and smart study	Agree	Positive
12	Student L	Headings (more topics), Impressive writing and calligraphy	10 Hours of Study, sitting in school till late at night, hard work	Not Agree	Negative

13	Student M	Cooperation by class fellows in the exam, the guidance of teachers	15-18 hours of extensive study	Not Agree	Negative
14	Student N	First attempt easy questions, Coloring and Highlighting, Sketches	The conceptual study, use of e-technology in preparation	Not Agree	Positive
15	Student O	Conceptual and to-the-point writing, no use of colors and highlighters	The memorization of lessons and conceptual clarity	Not Agree	Positive
16	Student P	Headings, neat writing, margin lines, use of colors	3 months of hard study, more time for science Subjects, and less for Arts	Agree	Negative
17	Student Q	Tricks from the internet regarding paper presentation, good handwriting, some tricks for writing	No physical or other activities, study and study, more time to Science subjects and less for Arts	Agree	Negative
18	Student R	Lining, good presentation, good handwriting, flow charts, headings	10-14 hours Study, Interactive Study	Agree	Negative
19	Student S	Color markers, highlighting, headings, underlining, end lines	Equal time for Science and Arts, normative Study	Agree	Negative
20	Student T	Blue and black markers, headings, impressive paper, lengthy writing, underlining	Memorization, nice words, correct memorization of lessons with the conceptual clarity	Not Agree	Negative
21	Student U	To the first attempt, easy questions, preferring answers that were best memorized, good handwriting	Writing questions after memorization, tough subjects in the morning time	Not Agree	Negative
22	Student V	Easy questions at first, Coloring for attraction	printed notes, guides, college notes, diagrams practice	Agree	Negative
23	Student W	Excellent presentation, good handwriting, and diagrams	Full-time study, has covered course five times	Agree	Negative
24	Student X	Attempted best-remembered questions at first and using of colors to impress the grader	9 hours of hard study, more time for Science subjects, and less for Arts	Not Agree	Negative
25	Student Y	Margins, proper heading, and diagrams, neat writing	The smart study, repeating the learned stuff and asking questions	Agree	Negative
26	Student Z	Attempting easy questions at first, good handwriting	5-7 hours of tough study	Agree	Negative

Table 1 shows that the respondents strongly believed in the impressive presentation (decoration) of the answer sheets by using different colors and decoration strategies to convince the graders for increased

marks. From the respondents' point of view, the beauty of the answer sheet was as crucial as the content, or maybe more than the content. During preparation for the exam, the participants claimed to focus on those areas that were supposed to be included. Most of them seemed to like memorizing the past five-year papers; others reported memorizing questions emphasized in schools. Other strategies they claimed to be using were making conscious efforts to impress the graders by attempting the questions; first, they said they had memorized best, leaving difficult questions for the end, using highlighters, and memorizing some power words, compelling sentences, and enthralling pieces of expressions.

Figure 2 below shows the students' opinions regarding joining a tuition academy for exam preparation. 14 out of the 26 participants were in favor of tuition academies. Thus, slightly more than half of the respondents used and recommended studying in a private tuition academy besides their school study.

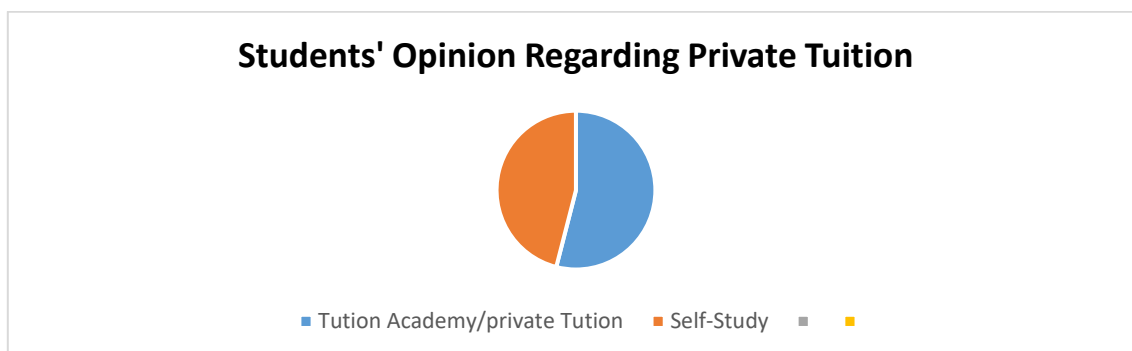


Figure 2. Students' opinions regarding Tuition Academy and school/self-study

Figure 3 indicates the students' opinions regarding paper presentation in the exam. 24 out of 26 students strongly believed in the impressive presentation of the paper by using different colors, highlighters, markers, and other decorative materials to attract the grader. However, 2 out of 26 students believed in quality content, clear concepts, and critical thinking more than paper presentations. Hence, for 92.3% of the students, the beauty and presentation of the paper were as important as the content, or even more than the content. However, 8.33% of the students did not care about paper presentations.

Figure 3. Students' opinions regarding paper decoration and presentation

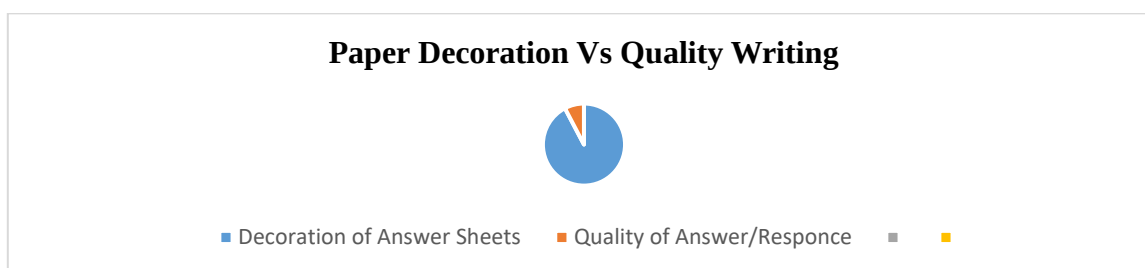


Figure 4 shows the students' strategies regarding exam preparation. Fourteen students favored exam-oriented study, 5 preferred smart and conceptual study, while 4 favored using exam cracking materials like notes and past five years' papers. However, 3 students favored giving more time to Science subjects than Arts subjects.

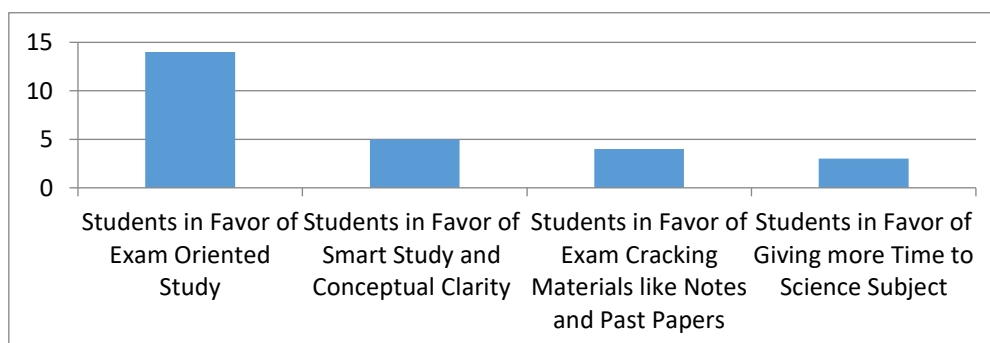
Figure 4. Students' Strategy of Preparation for SSC Exam

Discussion

The results indicate that 92% of students believed in an impressive paper presentation using different colors and highlighters and writing nicely memorized questions at first and the difficult ones in the end, while only 8% believed in conceptual clearance, brilliant study, and critical thinking. These findings suggest a negative washback on the student's learning and exam behavior. The students reported memorizing questions, past papers, and overtime study in school premises under the supervision of their instructors and school administration to cope with the examination in the best possible way because local boards in Pakistan require rote learning (Burdett and Everett, 2015). The students reported that they were taught on the board exam pattern. Burdett and Everett (2015) have rightly argued that examination dictates activities in school, and teachers typically teach what examinations demand rather than focusing on learning outcomes (Burdett and Everett, 2015). Participants of this research reported having severe test anxieties and obsessions with getting good grades rather than developing their critical thinking.

Furthermore, the fear of the repercussions of specific performances causes anxiety, which affects performance. Teachers' fear of bad outcomes and the guilt, humiliation, or embarrassment that comes with students' low performance may drive them to want their students to earn high scores in every way that seems plausible (Damankesh and Babaii, 2015). This might lead to "teaching to the test", with an undesirable narrowing of the curriculum to a testing level which negatively influences learning. Unfortunately, 92% of the students did not consider memorization and exam-oriented study as something bad and undesirable; rather, beautiful handwriting, memorization of questions given in the past five years papers, the use of colors, giving headings, and starting easy questions seemed to have covered up their grey areas and grammatical incompetency in their writing. It may be very well that in multi-skilled tests, test-takers may feel more confident since they can compensate for lack of proficiency in one skill by high proficiency in the other that the test normally tests (Green, 2013). Moreover, the students' opinions revealed that the nature of the SCC exam demanded a beautiful paper presentation and quality memorization more than critical thinking. Susanti (2014) reported that decreased reliance on skills that required critical thinking or problem-solving tended to foster a negative washback on teaching and learning practices (Susanti, 2014).

The findings suggest that the nature SSC examination does not promote high-order teaching and learning practices at an institutional level. The exam seems to have badly affected student learning, which in turn is regulated by teaching because testing devices had attained the value of teaching devices, and teaching and learning, which was highly focused on past examination papers, made the educational experience narrow and uninteresting (Susanti, 2014). Likewise, Susanti (2014) mentioned certain factors in the washback literature that could be perceived as adverse washback effects: these are curriculum narrowing, decreased reliance on skills that require critical thinking or problem-solving, test score 'pollution,' or increases in test scores without a parallel rise in the ability of the construct being tested (Susanti, 2014). Nearly all these forms of negative washback were found in this research. Hence, with reasonable confidence, it can be concluded from the findings of this study that the SSC examination negatively impacts students learning. However, the results of this research are based on data from a single source, i.e., students. Future research may collect data from teachers, school administrators, and those in charge of assessment task designing and



administration in the examination board to have a complete view of the phenomenon. Washback is the result of multiple factors. Holding a single factor for how students learn, why they learn, and what they learn does not provide a realistic insight into the issue and curriculum designers. Teacher and student factors (e.g., beliefs, attitudes, experience, education, training, personality, teaching and learning style), textbook writers and publishers (e.g., their interpretation of exam requirements), the status of the subject being tested, resources, and classroom conditions (management of school practices, communication between test providers and test-takers, the socio-political milieu) are some of the factors in which the test is administered. All these factors appear to have influenced the washback effect (Green, 2013).

Conclusion

The study attempted to explore the washback of SSC examination on teaching teaching-learning process. The results showed that due to exam taking strategies—decoration of answer sheet—mattered a lot in obtaining high marks. The participants reported memorization of material another key strategy that helped them get very good marks. The findings of this small-scale qualitative research though not highly generalizable evince poor reliability of SSC grading reliability as getting good marks in the SSC examination requires memorization of content, reproduction, impressive paper presentation, and memorization of past papers. Therefore, it is recommended that the reliability of the grading processes be ascertained. Raters marking manuscripts in the mentioned examination boards are properly trained in paper marking. Marking should be based on properly validated grading rubrics and approved answer keys. Leaving this important grading activity at the disposal of the whims of the raters is a bad practice. This practice is corrupting the thinking skills of the future generation which undermines higher-order learning. Feedback of this kind obstructs progress towards SDG-4: Quality Education, one of the 17 sustainable development goals, which aims at the provision of quality and equitable education for everyone at a global level. Further research can collect evidence from classrooms through observation and evaluation of the taught syllabus to further determine the impact of the SSC examination on teaching and learning processes to have a fuller view of the problem.

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