



RESEARCH PAPER

**Investigating Washback Effects of the GRE (Verbal) on Test Takers
(Successful & Unsuccessful) in Sindh, Pakistan**

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ABSTRACT

This study has investigated the washback of the verbal section of Graduate Record Examination (GRE) on test takers, specifically focusing on washback upon learners' perceptions, attitudes, and test preparation strategies in Sindh, Pakistan. The study employed a mixed method research design where survey was conducted from 56 participants and two focus group interviews were conducted from 8 GRE test takers. Two instruments were adapted from Hawkey (2006) and Moore et. al. (2012) respectively and the analysis was done using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis method. The data revealed that washback of GRE (verbal) was strong and it worked in both positive as well as negative directions. Students had positive views about the usefulness, motivation for taking the test, and standardized and systematic nature of the test making organisation, while they had negative views regarding the cost of the test, its difficult language and non-communicative vocabulary. Unsuccessful test takers were seen willing to take the test again by learning from their own experiences. Successful test takers shared preparation plans and strategies which helped them in getting the required scores. Test making authority of the GRE test must look into what test takers have to say about its cost and difficult language so that the test could be made more authentic and communicate for those who have to take it for getting scholarships abroad.

Introduction

Graduate Record Examination (GRE) is an entrance test set by various universities (all over the world) for the enrolment of students in post-graduation program (ETS, 2020). High-stake tests like IELTS, TOEFL, GRE, etc. have the ability

to make intentional as well as unintentional changes in the behaviours, perceptions, and practices of the test takers (Damankesh, 2015) as they can easily control the access of individual test takers in international education and other opportunities. According to Bachman and Palmer (1996), high-stake tests leave impacts on society and educational systems, and on the individuals which are a part of such systems.

Shohamy (2001) and Wall (1997) place washback within the scope of impact, which can be defined as any concept that covers the overall consequences and effects of examinations throughout the whole societies. Different tests have different consequences, their influences on the motivation, attitudes, and behaviours of the test takers also vary. Such influences and effects of tests on the practitioners are called 'washback effects' (Green, 2013). Research in washback has gained substantial attention in the last 25 years (Ahmmed & Rahman, 2019). The roots of washback could be traced from the idea that exams and tests have the capability and they ought to boost teaching and learning processes (Green, 2013).

The concept of washback is very important and it must be made a common phenomenon for all kinds of stakeholders, especially the test takers (Green, 2013). More than 1,300 business schools worldwide accept GRE scores for admittance into their MBA and specialized master's programs. The scores also work for five years, one can take the exam and then think about different options of studying abroad or in the country.

The verbal section of GRE test has been chosen for this study since this section aims at assessing linguistic (language) abilities of the test takers. Through this test, test taker's potential to learn could be assessed (Larsen & Buss, 2003).

Literature Review

Graduate Record Examination (GRE) is an international, high-stake exam that predicts applicant's abilities of success in various graduate schools in the world through verbal, quantitative, and analytical reasoning questions (Educational Testing Service, 2002). The exam is developed and administered by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). The test is accepted as a mandatory requirement in many universities all over the world.

Washback can simply be defined as the influence of an examination or a test on teaching and learning. It has long been known and recognized that testing always leaves impacts on educational system and society (Tayeb, Abd Aziz, Ismail, & Mohd Ayub Khan, 2014). High-stakes tests are the ones where the results affect the lives of students, teachers, administrators, parents or the general public as the basis upon which important decisions are made that immediately and directly affect the test-takers and other stakeholders (Langenfeld *et al.*, 1997; Madaus, 1985). Hughes (2005) also talks about washback as the overall impact of test on teachers, students, educational system and on the whole society.

It has been revealed by washback studies that attitudes, beliefs, academic experiences, and contextual circumstances tend to mediate the effects of testing on learning processes and on learners (Zhan & Wan, 2016). McNamara (1996) and Shohamy (2001), have interpreted the term 'washback' broadly as encompassing test effects not only on teaching and learning, but also on the education system and society as a whole. However, in many cases, the tests act as motivating factor for students and students hold positive attitudes regarding them no matter their scores come out to be good or lesser than expected (Tzagari, 2007).

The phenomenon of washback is known to be a bipolar one- either negative (harmful) or positive (beneficial). Washback affects can act as very powerful determiners of what happens in the test (Alderson and Wall, 1993). If positive learning outcomes are achieved as a result of increased motivation of learners and teachers regarding the learning procedures, then we can say that the test has a positive washback (Saville, 2009).

Washback studies of high-stake tests are highly significant in the test validation procedures as the data comes from learners, teachers, and other stakeholders from different countries on a wide range of areas; candidate profiles, test attitudes, perceptions of test motivation and stress, candidate and teacher perceptions of test relevance, difficulty and reliability, candidate and teacher views on test Preparation course content and materials, etc. the data collected by researchers on test washback may suggest changes that can help to improve the quality of the test design (Hawkey, 2006, Saville, 2009).

Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) in the United States investigated the existence of washback of a very prominent English language proficiency test, TOEFL on language teachers and students using interviews. They did classroom observation of two of the classes. Final results of this study showed that TOEFL had more direct effects on teaching content than on teaching methodology. In 2006, Hawkey conducted a washback study on perceptions of IELTS candidates about test fairness, level of difficulty, test anxiety, likes and dislikes, and time pressure. All these items are highly crucial for assessing validity of high-stake tests. The results showed that 72% of the research participants believed that the test was fairly designed to measure their proficiency in English language.

Study of washback affects is very important as tests have enormous effects on the whole lives of test takers, as they are the agents who create 'winners and losers', 'success and failure', and 'acceptance and rejections' in the world (Shohamy, 2001).

Material and Methods

Research Design

In the current study, mixed method approach (concurrent design) has been used for the process of collecting and analyzing the data. Mixed methods research is

a research paradigm or approach that is becoming increasingly recognized as the third major research approach (Johnson et al., 2007). According to Hawkey (2006), it is the demand of washback research that types of data collection must be multiple. Surveys, questionnaires, and interviews are few of the most relevant methods to test washback effects (Saville, 2009).

Since the study focuses on the wider effects of the GRE (verbal) on the learners, the stakeholders that have been selected are the test takers of the GRE test. So, for types of data collection, two methods have been employed i.e. A cross sectional survey through questionnaire and semi-structured focus group interviews. Former is a highly useful type of surveys, which is used in educational context. In this type, the data is collected by the researcher at only one time period (Creswell, 2012). Similarly, a focus group discussion is a data collecting method used in qualitative research, where specific set of issues are explored in detail by performing discussions with pre-determined population sample (Memon, 2015).

On the quantitative side, a survey based research questionnaire was provided to 65 test takers of the GRE exam with an aim to assess how the test washback affected their performance in the test. Similarly, on the qualitative side, two focus group interviews have been conducted from around 8 participants form this category as well, again using a semi structured interview protocol. One interview intended to collect data from successful test takers of the GRE test and the other one was conducted from unsuccessful ones, in order to make sure that successful and unsuccessful participants talk about their practices, views, and experiences quite exclusively. The intention behind conducting these interviews was to explore how the test washback affected their hard work, learning strategies, and consequences.

If you want to know about the opinions, attitudes, and beliefs of a large number of people, then usage of questionnaires is considered as a crucial step. Hence, in the area if washback, the usage of questionnaires has been considered as a popular and useful means of data collection (Akpinar, 2013).

I have adapted the questionnaire used and validated by Hawkey (2006) which contains appropriate questions to be used in a washback study like this where the researcher is interested to know about test preparers' background, their motivations in preparing for the test and their test preparation approaches.

Validity and Reliability

Validity aims at explaining whether the collected data covers the actual area that is being investigated or not (Jackson, 2003). In other words, validity explains whether the research instrument does the work that it is supposed to do. I.e. does it measure the data that the research intends to measure? Similarly, reliability of the test is defined as the extent to which the measurement scores of the data are free from any kind of error (Mujis, 2011). While measuring concepts in a study, the

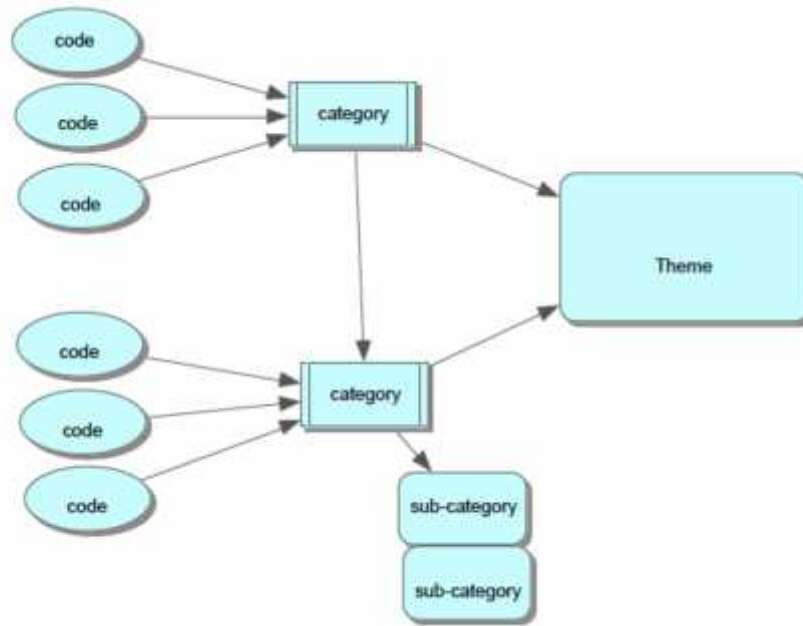
measurement of stability of the instrument and internal consistency of items is called reliability (Jackson, 2003).

The questionnaire for the current study had been adapted from an established questionnaire made and validated by Hawkey (2006). The instrument had 34 items in total, out of which, some were developed by researcher as well in order to make sure that the washback effects of the GRE test can be assessed clearly. The questionnaire had four categories; (a) English language background, (b) profession, (c) about the GRE (verbal) test, and (d) about the GRE (verbal) preparation.

In the current study, the type of reliability measurement that has been considered is 'internal consistency reliability', and the internal consistency of the tool has been checked through SPSS by checking through Chronbach alpha value. So, in order to make sure that the items in the instrument were consistent with each other and contributed in making the instrument reliable, the chronbach alpha value was checked, and came out as 0.75.

For the quantitative parts, the study used 65 participants in total. For the qualitative part, 2 focus group interviews were conducted using around 8 participants in the interviews. The study has utilized the method of convenient & snowball sampling for collecting research participants. Snowball sampling works best in those situations when the researcher finds it difficult to identify the participants so they are located through a chain of network (Creswell, 2012). Finally, participants were chosen from the Sindh province of Pakistan (participants will were gathered from these two cities in the non-random manner). Nonprobability method is one of the methods where researcher selects those participants who are easily available (Naderifar, 2017)

The process of 'Thematic Analysis' has been used which is a strategy for categorizing qualitative data (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Saldaña, 2009). All the transcripts were read by the researcher so that a sense of familiarity could be generated. Then, codes were made from the important features of the interview transcripts. Codes were transformed into categories on the basis of similarity among codes and then various themes were formed. The themes were developed from codes and categories using Saldaña's model (2009). The emerging themes focus group discussion were then revised and refined by comparing a range of issues within and across different methods of data collection to identify what the discussion collectively reveals (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). This way, one thematic framework was created consisting of main themes and sub-themes.



The data has been interpreted through the triangulation method, which is done in those research studies that make use of multiple kinds of ways to collect and analyze data in order to understand a complex problem (Hesse-Biber, 2012). Different types of collected data can be integrated with each other for presenting a detailed and complex understanding of the concept that is to be studied (Creswell, 2012), so at this stage, meaning is constructed from the analyzed data (qualitative as well as quantitative). Qualitative method in the research is used for the discovery and exploration of issues and quantitative is used to describe behaviors, however, triangulation of both is done at the end in order to present the findings at one platform (Hesse-Biber, 2012).

Results and Discussions

Participants' Characteristics

The collected data showed that out of 55 people, 28 were males and 26 were females. It shows that the data was collected from both of the genders and almost equal number of them participated in it. It also shows that 47% of them were doing jobs in different fields and 38% of them were still studying and pursuing higher education. Out of them, most of the students were doing PhD/masters as they had taken the GRE test for taking admission in PhD or masters abroad. Moreover, only 15% of the participants were unemployed.

Reason for Taking the GRE Test

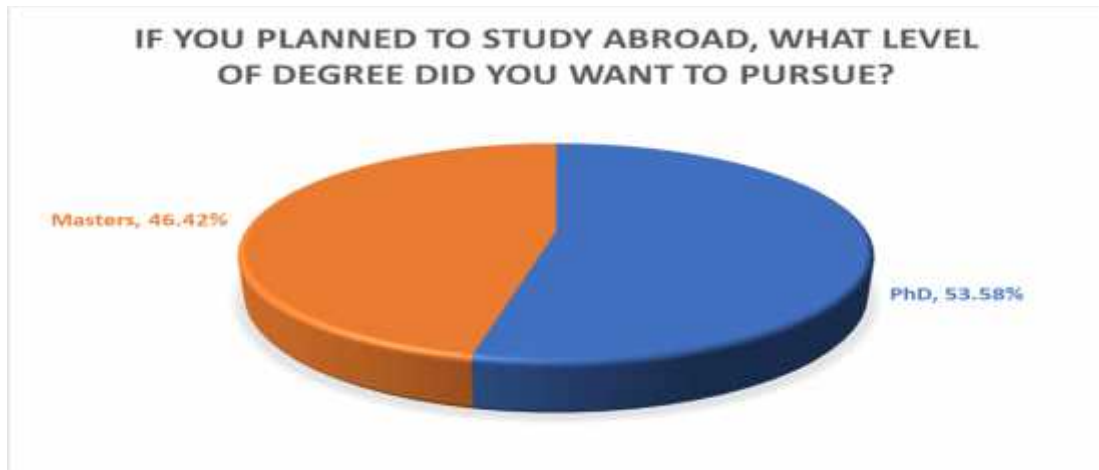


Fig 1.1: Participants' responses for taking the GRE test

The collected data revealed that the basic motivation or reasons that all the participants shared for taking the GRE test were almost same. It was seen that every one of them shared only one reason and that was the admission in higher education in different universities of the world, especially the US. 53.58% of them had to secure admission in PhD and the rest (i.e. 46.42% of them wanted to do masters abroad.

"I had to take the GRE test as it was one of the most important requirements for getting PhD scholarship in the USA" (p1)

However, it was also important to know what they think and feel about being the GRE test as one of the mandatory processes to go through for securing admission in universities. So this question was asked from them in the next phase of the study, i.e. the focus-group interviews and they shared their perceptions and views about it.

Anxiety and Pressure of the Test

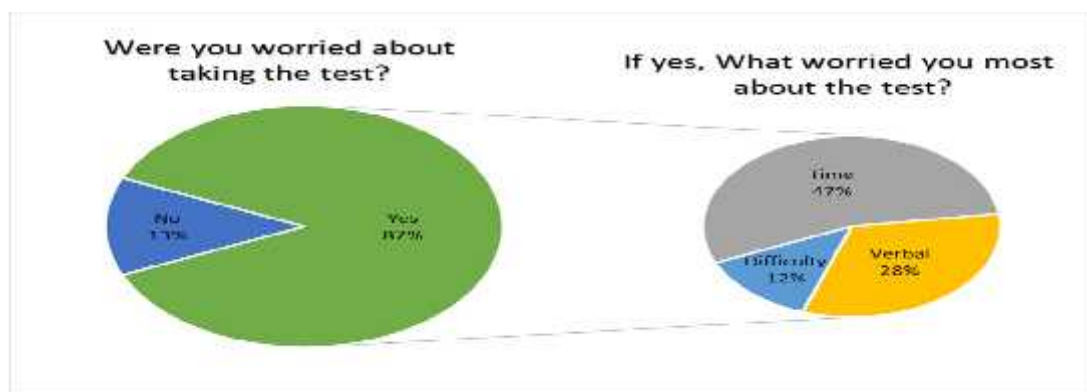


Fig 1.2: Effects of anxiety and time pressure on participants

When asked about it in the questionnaire, a big majority of the participants, i.e. 87% of them said that yes, they were worried and anxious about the test and only 13% of them denied it.

“I was so anxious. I wasn’t relaxed. I had the fear that I was getting out of time. Due to it, I was unable to focus on easier questions that I could have solved. But just because of the anxiety and time pressure, I could not focus” (p6).

“Just because I was anxious, I couldn’t get to the target” (p5).

“Yes, I was very anxious but I guess I had not taken any mock test, that’s why I had anxiety” (p8).

In the next question, they were asked to share reasons for being or not being anxious and worried. They were asked to talk about the parts of the test that made them worried and anxious. It was revealed that time pressure is something that made many of them (47%) worried about the test. 27% of the participants shared that they were worried because they found the verbal part of the test difficult. Finally, 12% of them showed that they were worried because they found the entire test difficult.

Focus Group Discussion (Unsuccessful candidates)

In the current study, one of the focus group interviews was conducted from unsuccessful candidates of the GRE test in order to compare their practices and test preparation strategies from successful ones. Unsuccessful participants were the ones who could not get required score in the GRE (especially the verbal section), and had failed to get admission in the universities abroad.

This theme was created on the basis of the responses of the participants. All the participants in the interview (n=4) shared that they were highly anxious at the time of test. Majority of them shared that the anxiety was there because of the short time of the test. One of the participants even said that due to the anxiety she was not able to perform well in the test and she could not get a good score. Similarly, all of them were highly anxious also because of the fact that it was their first time to appear in the GRE test. So, we can say that the idea of appearing in this test makes the candidates anxious and stressed out.

Again for this point, all the participants in the interview (n=4) shared that verbal section was very difficult for them.

“This sections needs to be made a little bit simpler, if it’s possible” (p6)

However, the reasons that they shared were varied. Some of them found the vocabulary difficult and some found the reading comprehension complex.

“I don’t think that I will ever be able to get my desired score due to the difficulty of reading comprehension part” (p8).

They also added that the test making authorities should think about making this section easier, especially for candidates who appear from under-developed countries like ours.

“I don’t think that GRE should be mandatory for under developed countries as we might be good in our respectable fields, but if we are not good in English, we fail to avail scholarships “(p6).

Here for this point too, all the participants (n=4) showed their negatives attitudes and perceptions towards the idea of taking GRE as an entrance to get admission in universities of their choice. However, the reason behind such negative attitudes were different for different participants. All the responses together showed that the participants were against the idea of this test as being used as one if the mandatory processes for admissions in different universities of the world.

“GRE verbal does not fulfil the purpose. It just checks cramming of vocab and words. A basic 10 min interview can assess the candidates seeking for admissions better” (p5)

Focus Group Discussion (Successful Candidates)

About more than half of the successful GRE takers (n=3) shared that they were anxious during the test and the major reason behind it was the time pressure. Only one of them said that he was not anxious.

“Although I knew I could always retake test if I fail to get the required score, I was anxious. I believe it is a general anxiety that most people feel whenever they take a test of such challenge” (p2).

However, if we look at his profile, he had taken the test four times so his experience had made him confident enough to not to feel anxious during or before the test.

Here the views of the participants were not similar. Half of the participants (n=2) said that they found the verbal section (sentence equivalence and vocabulary) highly difficult and they had to give a lot of time to practice and learn those things. Both of these participants had taken the test more than once because it had not been easier for them to get required score in verbal section. Other participants (n=2) shared that they had been working hard to learn and acquire different skills of English since childhood and this previous knowledge helped them to get good score in English so they did not find this section much hard.

Washback Effects

Data was collected quantitatively to answer this question and then through the qualitative method, the issue was explored in great detail. According to Pearson

(1988) the most complete research method to investigate the washback effect of a standardized test on learners is to talk to them and ask questions from them about their attitudes, behaviors, and practices (either through written or verbal questionnaires).

It is a common notion that standardized tests influence the motivation, attitudes, behaviors, and practices of learners (Pearson, 1988). Thus, in the category of washback, we can put the motivation of learners to take the test, their level of anxieties, attitudes, and other such effects over their behaviors. The collected data revealed that the only motivation that all the GRE test takers had to take this test was that of extrinsic as 100% of them took it for getting scholarships in various universities of the world to pursue higher education.

When the participants were asked to share their views about this test as one of the mandatory steps of the process, almost all of them shared in one or another way that if they had a choice, they would have skipped this step as it took so much of their time, energy and money and they did not find it useful. So, they were against the concept of GRE test as a gatekeeper for scholarships abroad. They shared that if they were made to appear in a few minute interview, they would have shown that whether they were deserving candidates to get the scholarship abroad or not. Similarly, they shared that due to COVID 19, many universities have just waived off GRE and they are accepting students on the basis of other formalities, which means that if they completely erase this test out of the system, there will be no effect on the system of admissions.

The Washback was also assessed by looking at the levels of anxieties and pressures on the candidates (WALL, 1992). Majority of the participants shared that they were highly anxious while preparing for the test and while taking the test. When they were asked to talk about this aspect during interviews, they shared valuable information about it in detail. For majority of them, the time pressure of the test was something that made them highly anxious. Then other aspects that made them tensed and anxious were difficult language used in the verbal part and expensive nature of the test (as their money go wasted if they fail it). We should note here that during the survey, information about participants' educational backgrounds, usage of English language in daily life, and usage of English at various levels of education (school, college, and university) was taken. On the basis of such information, it was revealed that the majority of the participants were highly educated and they had been getting exposure of English language through their education and social life. So, when majority of them share that they find the language and vocabulary of the verbal section difficult, we may assume that it is actually difficult for people belonging to the country, Pakistan. Participants also shared that for a country like Pakistan, the test is not only difficult, but very much expensive also and we students cannot easily afford it.

The findings of the study revealed that all the successful GRE test takers had used these strategies to prepare for the test and thus they experienced positive

washback and got required score. These were the successful GRE test takers as it was seen that all the successful participants shared that when they appeared in the test, they were satisfied with their performance as they worked really hard to achieve their goal.

They were also made to talk about the factors that affected their performance during the test. Their answers revolved around following factors:

- Time Pressure
- Difficulty of language used in the test
- Difficulty of the Verbal section
- Fear of testing

Similarly, participants were also asked to talk about the fairness of the test (i.e. whether GRE (verbal) was a fair way to assess their linguistic abilities) and majority of them (during the survey) and almost all of them (during the interviews) shared that according to them, their linguistic abilities must be assessed through other ways like face to face interviews, etc.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study confirms the claim that examinations do have the power to influence learners' learning and strategic behaviours. The study concludes that the intensity of the washback of GRE test (verbal section) is quite strong as it determines what learners have to do with their preparation plans, practices, etc. however, the washback that was investigated came out to be both positive as well as negative. Positive in a sense that learners do believe that GRE is a useful test and they work hard to get good score in it as they know that it is a requirement for their enrolment in various universities of the world. Similarly, washback also becomes positive when the instructions of the test are clear and when learners know the demands of the test, how and when scores will be presented to them, and when resources are provided to them. The study concludes that here also the washback works in a positive way as the official website of ETS (the test making organisation that develops the GRE test) provides the learners with useful and adequate knowledge, resources, and mock tests and students were seen satisfied with this service. Those who had failed to get the required score in past were also seen willingly appear in the test again as they believed that more practice and more strategic planning could make them able to score better.

However, it has been found that learners experience anxiety and stress due to various factors of the test like cost of the test, difficult language used in the test especially the verbal section, extremely difficult (and something that they do not have to use in real life) nature of vocabulary that they have to memorise, and some-what

non-communicative nature of the verbal section. Here, the direction of washback is somewhat in the negative way.

First and foremost, learners must be made to understand the test demands, content, format, and weighting of the test sections; they must know how to prepare and how to improve; and they must know how to interpret their scores. Such information must be provided by test developers for stakeholders in order to promote positive washback from the test. Similarly, by making use of washback researchers, the test making authority should also look at the attitudes and perceptions of the test takers about everything that is a part of the test and should make important decisions accordingly.

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