Investigating Washback Effects on Teaching: A Case Study of An Exit Examination at the Higher Education Level

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Abstract

In Thai contexts, studies on washback effects of high-stakes tests have been investigated extensively at the high school level. However, little is known about the occurrence of washback effects of high-stakes tests on teaching at the higher education level. This study aimed to investigate the washback effects of the Srinakharinwirot University Standardized English Test (SWU-SET), which is implemented as an exit examination for undergraduate students at a Thai public university in Thailand, on teaching English. The research question was: What are the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching? A mixed-methods design was employed to answer the research question. In total, 25 university teachers completed the teacher questionnaire, five of whom were purposively selected to be the informants. The main findings show that the SWU-SET induced the teachers to put their effort into helping students achieve the course objectives and the test objectives. The

findings reveal that the SWU-SET and its underlying concept allowed the teachers to make connections between teaching, learning, and assessment. This study suggests that teachers should be aware of the importance of making connections between curriculum, teaching, learning, and tests in their teaching routines.

Introduction

Tests are one of the significant components in language learning and teaching. They can be used to place students into an appropriate level, identify students' needs for language improvement, and record students' learning progress. Teachers can use test results to plan and design their instruction to best serve their students' needs. The use of high-stakes tests has been widely recognized to induce either intended or unintended washback effects on teaching. Tests presumably drive teachers to teach with the goal of promoting students' learning achievement. However, a number of washback studies (Ali et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2021; Wall & Alderson, 1993) have proven that tests usually come before teaching and have influences on teaching. As the teacher is the key person in the classroom, aspects of their teaching with respect to tests have a great effect on students' learning. Therefore, it is essential to investigate connections between tests and teaching to see how well tests can improve the quality of teaching and learning.

Factors leading to washback effects on teaching have become the foci of investigations. As the occurrence of washback is complicated, these factors range from test formats to teacher factors. The multiple-choice format used in large-scale tests is claimed to lead to teaching receptive skills rather than productive skills because the latter are not assessed in the tests (Wall & Alderson, 1993; Watanabe, 1996). This encourages teachers to skip the teaching of skills that are not tested in the test (Akiyama, 2003), such as speaking and writing, and place an emphasis on teaching linguistic competence (Rahman et al., 2021) through aspects such as grammar and vocabulary instead. In addition, a wide range of teacher factors are claimed to mediate between teaching and tests. These include perceived quality of the test (Shohamy et al., 1996), educational background (Watanabe, 1996), teaching experience (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996), knowledge of assessment literacy (Turner, 2005; Webb, 2002), nervousness and anxiety (Ferman, 2004), and degree of teachers'

familiarity with a wide range of teaching methods (Watanabe, 2004). Turner (2005) reported that teachers who were literate in assessment and were aware of the relationship between tests and teaching were more likely to implement the underlying concepts of tests and what is tested to drive their teaching towards learning goals. In other words, they were able to teach students learning strategies and include classroom activities which could promote development of students' English proficiency. To conclude, it could be inferred that washback effects on teaching could be induced by teacher factors.

In the Thai educational context, the majority of studies have investigated the washback effects of high-stakes tests on teaching, particularly at the secondary school level. Findings from these studies revealed unintended effects, such as teaching English through test items and spending a lot of class time on test preparation (Imsa-ard, 2020; Lunrasri, 2014) rather than language use and language for communication. However, little is known about the washback effects of high-stakes tests on teaching at the higher education level. The Srinakharinwirot University Standardized English Test (SWU-SET), which was developed and aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), is meant to be used as an exit examination at a Thai public university in Bangkok, Thailand. With such a purpose, it is possible that it could have significant effects on English language teaching. Therefore, investigating washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching would provide empirical evidence of a connection between the test and teaching in a Thai educational context.

An overview of the washback research in various contexts indicated that washback research should be viewed as a means of improving the quality of classroom teaching. This study aimed to investigate the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching English as it would be fruitful to know what and how teachers teach students in classrooms to promote students' learning English at the higher education level. The research question of this study was as follows: What are the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching?

Literature Review

Washback

In educational research, different terms have been used to represent test effects, such as consequential validity (Messick, 1996), test usefulness (Bachman & Palmer, 1996), and washback (Alderson & Wall, 1993). Well-designed tests induce intended washback effects when teachers understand the underlying concepts of a test and integrate them into their teaching routines (Turner, 2005). In contrast, tests induce unintended washback effects when they influence teachers to focus on discrete-point topics assessed in the tests (e.g., vocabulary and structures) rather than students' language development (Wall, 2000). Moreover, high-stakes tests can lead to pressure on teachers to make extensive preparations for teaching and learning activities because test results can determine students' accomplishment of educational goals (Kılıçkaya, 2016; Rahman et al., 2021).

To gain in-depth understanding of washback effects, it is important to examine mediators between tests and teaching such as test factors, contextual factors, and teacher factors (i.e., knowledge, beliefs, and experience). Studies have indicated that the characteristics of high-stakes tests are likely to influence teachers to teach skills and content tested, especially grammar, vocabulary, and test-taking strategies (Kılıçkaya, 2016; Lunrasri, 2014; Watanabe, 1996), to help students gain high test scores. However, they seem to neglect skills and content that are not tested such as listening and speaking (Kılıçkaya, 2016). In recent years, a lot of research has revealed the important role of teacher factors in mediating tests and teaching (Kiomrs et al., 2011; Watanabe, 2004). Teachers have used a myriad of knowledge (i.e., teaching methods and assessment literacy), beliefs and experience to help students develop their language competence and also meet the demands of tests. They believed that there was a need to teach grammar, vocabulary, reading and test-taking strategies to prepare students for tests (Kılıçkaya, 2016). Unfortunately, they ignored teaching some important content or skills (i.e., listening and speaking) which were not tested in high-stakes tests but are meaningful and beneficial to students' lives. Moreover, teachers would use test-related materials, adjust test items for school tests, assign tasks related to the tests, and devote their class time to test preparation (Imsa-

ard, 2020; Lunrasri, 2014). This can lead to unintended washback effects on teaching because they would teach only discrete pieces of knowledge (e.g., grammar rules and vocabulary) without sufficient contexts for communication (Watanabe, 1996). In fact, teachers could promote intended washback effects on teaching by using the information about the tests or tested skills to design their classroom activities (Shohamy et al., 1996; Turner, 2005) or provide students with informative guidance on how to prepare for the tests (Sriwilaijaroen & Piamsai, 2018). Clearly, teachers play a significant role in students' language learning and achievement on the test.

Researchers employ a wide range of research methods to understand the mechanism and conditions leading to washback and its complex nature. While questionnaires and interviews have been widely employed to understand the participants' perspectives of the washback effects on teaching and learning (Luxia, 2005), classroom observation has also been used to identify teachers' changes and pedagogical practices resulting from tests (Wall & Alderson, 1993). Yet, there is a need for a research tool that could help researchers understand the complicated nature of washback, especially how tests influence teachers' thinking processes with regard to teaching and learning. Think-aloud has been suggested as an effective research tool to help understand a cognitive process (Afflerbach, 2002; Sasaki, 2008). Those who perform a think-aloud are able to report what is in their mind while performing a task, for example, strategies they implemented or factors affecting their decision to utilize certain teaching methods, learning materials or evaluative approaches in classrooms (Damankesh & Babaii, 2015).

Research Methodology

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was employed in this study. A quantitative approach was utilized to identify the causes of washback, and a qualitative approach was used to gain in-depth information about how the SWU-SET had influences on the teachers' teaching routines. The strengths of these two approaches could help the researchers gain a better understanding of what factors contributed to the washback effects

of the SWU-SET on teaching as well as to what extent the teachers' practices were affected by the SWU-SET.

The Participants

A total of 25 English teachers were the participants of the study. They were full-time university teachers at the Language and Academic Services Centre of Srinakharinwirot University. They held either a master's degree or a doctorate in education, intercultural communication, or linguistics, had experience in teaching foundation English courses and were involved in the process of developing the SWU-SET. They were asked to complete a questionnaire. Five teachers who had at least five years of teaching experience at the present university and were a part of the test development were purposively selected from the pool (see Appendix A for the information concerning the selected participants). They were interviewed and observed in the classroom, performed an introspective think-aloud, and wrote reflective journals. The teachers were appropriate informants since they were involved in the process of developing the test and also had a clear understanding of the washback effects of the test on teaching in this specific context.

The Srinakharinwirot University Standardized English Test

The Srinakharinwirot University Standardized English Test (SWU-SET), implemented at a Thai public university, was developed and based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The SWU-SET is specifically used for undergraduate students as a criterion for exemption from foundation English courses and as an exit examination for graduation. First-year students who reach a score of at least 78 out of 100 (equivalent to B2) can get an exemption from the foundation English courses. Otherwise, they have to enroll in those English courses. Regarding third-year students, those who reach a score of at least 78 out of 100 achieve the test requirement for graduation. Otherwise, they are required to enroll in a remedial course or submit the test results of another English standardized test equivalent to the SWU-SET (i.e., TOEFL, IELTS, or TOEIC). In addition, the test is also used as a screening test for recruiting appropriate candidates who want to work at the university. The SWU-SET, currently available as a paper-based test, consists of five parts, which are

listening, vocabulary, structure, usage and functional language, and reading, each of which consists of 20 items in a multiple-choice format. It takes three hours to complete the test.

Research Instruments

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed from Shih's washback model of teaching (2009) and previous washback studies (Lunrasri, 2014; Wall & Alderson, 1993). It was aimed at eliciting teachers' perception and awareness concerning the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching. There were two parts totaling 34 items using a five-point Likert scale (ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree). The first part was meant to elicit the teachers' perceptions of the SWU-SET and its effects on teaching (16 items), and the second was used to investigate the teachers' awareness of the washback effects on teaching (18 items). The questionnaire was validated by three experts using the index of item-objective congruence (IOC).

Semi-structured interview

The semi-structured interview was aimed at eliciting in-depth information about the teachers' awareness of the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching. The interview questions were developed and adapted from Shih's washback model of teaching (2009) and the previous studies of Lunrasri (2014) and Watanabe (2004). There were 10 questions. The interview questions were validated by three experts using the index of item-objective congruence (IOC).

Classroom Observations

Classroom observations were used to investigate classroom materials, teaching content and instruction implemented in classrooms and whether such things were aligned with what was tested on the SWU-SET. The observations were conducted in a foundation English course in the academic year of 2019. This course was basically aimed at developing first-year students' communicative competence in English. There were 15

three-hour class meetings between January 13 and May 5, 2020. Five classes were randomly selected and observed through face-to-face (before the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown) and online settings (during the pandemic) twice per class. Each observation lasted around 30-60 minutes.

Introspective think-aloud

The introspective think-aloud was aimed at eliciting the thought processes of the teachers to investigate the extent to which the SWU-SET had influences on teaching. Two types of materials were developed with two different purposes: one for demonstration and training and the other for the actual performance of the think-aloud. The first type was test items taken from a previous edition of Thammasat University General English Test (TU-GET). Such a test was chosen and used as a prompt for helping the teachers to get familiar with the think-aloud procedure because it contained tasks whose characteristics were similar to those of the SWU-SET. The second type was test items taken from the SWU-SET and was used as a prompt to perform the actual think-aloud. During the think-aloud, the teachers received the prompt and then were asked to verbalize what was in their mind regarding how they planned their instruction, what materials they used for teaching the foundation English course, how they integrated a variety of strategies to help students handle test items on the SWU-SET, and what they taught to help students deal with test anxiety and time management. They were also reminded to report the aspects of the SWU-SET which had effects on planning lessons, designing learning materials, teaching, and assessing students' learning.

Classroom Materials

Classroom materials were collected to examine whether the teachers had used any materials or exercises whose content and features were similar to those of the SWU-SET to achieve the course objectives and/or the testing objectives of the test. The classroom materials were collected from the materials used in the foundation English course in the 2019 academic year. They consisted of the course syllabus, coursebooks, supplementary materials, quizzes, and assignments.

Reflective Journals

Reflective journals were employed to gain insights into teachers' perceptions of the relationship between their teaching and the SWU-SET and the effects of the test on teaching. The teachers were asked to write two reflective journals: one at the beginning and the other at the end of the study.

Data Collection

The researchers initially collected classroom materials, observed classrooms, and employed teacher reflective journal I to learn what the teachers in this study perceived regarding the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching. Next, the teachers were asked to participate in a think-aloud session, which included demonstration, training, practice and actual performance of the think-aloud. This was aimed at eliciting the teachers' cognitive processes regarding the SWU-SET and its effects on teaching. Finally, the teachers were interviewed, wrote teacher reflective journal II and III, and completed the questionnaire. At this stage, the data from the aforementioned instruments provided the researchers with the insights into the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was divided into two parts: quantitative and qualitative data analyses. Descriptive statistics (i.e., the arithmetic mean and standard deviation) were used to analyze the data from the questionnaire to reveal teachers' perceptions of the SWU-SET and its effects and teachers' awareness of the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching. Content analysis was utilized to analyze the qualitative data. We read and familiarized ourselves with the transcripts and developed the themes which emerged from the transcripts. After several rounds of discussion, we observed the relationships between the themes and came up with three main themes. To validate coding, we asked two independent raters to help with the validation. They were a university teacher who was specialized in language testing and a school teacher who was familiar with the test. The raters received training on the coding system and practiced coding a sample of the transcripts. There was a discussion to resolve any

inconsistency among the three raters. The raters were asked to code a sample of the transcripts based on the coding system. We coded the transcriptions twice and after that, we compared the coded data with the raters' coding by using Cohen's kappa. The level of agreement among the raters was analyzed. There was almost perfect agreement between the raters' judgments, with a kappa value of .896.

Research Findings

Washback of the SWU-SET on Teaching

The findings obtained from the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data are presented in two parts: teachers' perceptions of the SWU-SET and its effects and teachers' awareness of washback effects on teaching. In addition, the findings obtained from the qualitative analyses are presented in terms of teachers' practices in classrooms.

Teachers' Perceptions of the SWU-SET

The findings show how the teachers perceived the SWU-SET and its effects.

Table 1

The Mean, Standard Deviation, and Level of Agreement regarding Statements about Teachers' Perceptions of the SWU-SET and Its Effects

Teachers' Perceptions Towards the SWU-SET and Its Effects	Mean	SD	Level
1. I know that the SWU-SET is implemented as a criterion for the exit examination.	4.63	.81	Strongly Agree
2. I know that the SWU-SET is implemented as a criterion for exemption.	4.69	.79	Strongly Agree
3. The SWU-SET is used to measure students' language proficiency.	4.88	.34	Strongly Agree
4. The SWU-SET can help me prepare students for their future careers.	4.13	.96	Agree
5. The SWU-SET can help me prepare students for their future studies.	4.31	.70	Strongly Agree
6. The content of the SWU-SET is related to English in real life.	4.25	.86	Strongly Agree
7. The SWU-SET focuses on four language skills.	4.19	.91	Agree

8. The SWU-SET has influences on my English language teaching in the classroom.	4.06	.68	Agree
9. Teaching test-taking strategies in classrooms can increase test scores on the SWU-SET.	3.88	1.02	Agree
10. I create a particular teaching material for skills tested in the SWU-SET (e.g., reading skills and listening skills).	3.88	.86	Agree
11. I can make changes in my teaching as a result of the SWU-SET.	3.81	.83	Agree
12. The SWU-SET can motivate students to participate more in classrooms.	3.81	1.05	Agree
13. The SWU-SET can motivate students to study English language outside of the classroom on their own.	3.88	.72	Agree
14. The SWU-SET can motivate teachers to teach English by focusing on communication.	3.69	.79	Agree
15. The SWU-SET can motivate teachers to teach English by focusing on language forms.	4.13	.62	Agree
16. The information about the quality of the SWU-SET (e.g., validity, reliability, item discrimination, etc.) helps me understand the SWU-SET and its effects.	4.31	.70	Strongly Agree
Total	4.16	.43	Agree

As can be seen in Table 1, the teachers agreed and strongly agreed with the statements showing their perceptions of the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching. The mean scores ranged from 3.69 (SD = .79) to 4.88 (SD = .34). The three statements with the highest mean scores were Item 3 (M = 4.88, SD = .34), Item 2 (M = 4.69, SD =.79), and Item 1 (M = 4.63, SD = .81). From the teachers' points of view, the teachers perceived that the SWU-SET was implemented to measure students' English proficiency for exemption from the foundation English courses and for graduation.

An analysis of the interview reveals that the teachers obviously perceived the significance of the SWU-SET and its underlying concepts, the university policy on the test, its effects on teaching and learning, and its effects on different stakeholders (i.e., undergraduate students, graduate students, employers, and university administrators), as can be seen in Excerpts 1 and 2.

Excerpt 1

> *The SWU-SET was designed and developed with the purpose of aligning it with the concept of the CEFR. The aim of the test was to measure English proficiency levels of students here. But now, the SWU-SET is implemented*

as an exit examination for undergraduate students or an admission test for graduate students.

(Teacher 5, personal communication, June 27, 2020)

Excerpt 2

In the part of usage and functional language, there were different levels of questions ranging from A2 to C1. …The use of each expression varied depending on its function in the English language, such as making a request, ordering food, and ending the conversation. I would explain to my students that the expressions would be different depending on contexts.

(T2, personal communication, June 27, 2020)

Teachers' Awareness of the Washback Effects of the SWU-SET on Teaching

The findings reveal that the teachers were aware of the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching. An analysis of the teacher questionnaire is presented in Table 2.

Table 2

The Mean, Standard Deviation, and Level of Agreement regarding Statements about Teachers' Awareness of the Washback Effects of the SWU-SET on Teaching

Teachers' Awareness of the Washback Effects on Teaching	Mean	SD	Level
17. I teach English content and skills which are more likely to appear in the SWU-SET.	3.56	1.03	Agree
18. I use the CEFR descriptors in my teaching because they are related to the SWU-SET.	3.50	.82	Agree
19. I use teaching materials that relate to the SWU-SET.	3.38	.81	Neutral
20. I focus on teaching structures and vocabulary in classrooms to help students pass the SWU-SET.	3.31	.95	Neutral
21. Due to the SWU-SET, I have to find new teaching methods to prepare students to pass the test.	3.69	.79	Agree
22. I use the student-centered approach to prepare students for the SWU-SET in classrooms.	3.44	1.03	Agree
23. I think that the SWU-SET encourages me to use English as the medium of instruction in the classroom.	3.50	.73	Agree
24. I use English in the classroom because I see the connection between the SWU-SET and its importance for students' future careers.	3.69	.87	Agree
25. I spend time on classroom activities that help	3.81	.91	Agree

students perform well on the SWU-SET, e.g., vocabulary and structure activities.			
26. I spend time on classroom activities that help students improve their English proficiency.	4.25	.58	Strongly Agree
27. I design test items for foundation English courses to match the test items of the SWU-SET.	3.13	1.02	Neutral
28. I promote students' understanding of the SWU-SET by assigning homework relating to the SWU-SET.	3.19	1.11	Neutral
29. I assign reviews of structure and vocabulary that might appear in the SWU-SET to students.	3.56	1.03	Agree
30. I am afraid that my students might receive a poor test result after they take the SWU-SET.	3.50	1.03	Agree
31. I feel pressured by either the university or students to improve the students' SWU-SET scores.	3.31	.79	Neutral
32. I inform my students about the university's policies related to the SWU-SET in my classrooms to promote students' language learning.	4.31	.87	Strongly Agree
33. I believe that the SWU-SET enhances teachers' positive attitudes towards language teaching.	3.81	.93	Agree
34. I believe that the SWU-SET enhances teachers' positive attitudes towards language learning.	4.00	.82	Agree
Total	3.61	.56	Agree

As shown in Table 2, the teachers strongly agreed and agreed on the statements showing their awareness of the washback effects of the SWU-SET on teaching. The mean scores ranged from 3.50 (SD = .82) to 4.31 (SD = .87). The three statements with the highest mean scores were Item 32 (M = 4.31, SD = .87), Item 26 (M = 4.25, SD = .58), and Item 34 (M = 4.00, SD = .82). From the teachers' points of view, they were aware that informing students about university's policies concerning the SWU-SET is necessary for promoting students' English learning because students are required to pass the test. Interestingly, the teachers had neutral opinions towards Item 31 (M = 3.31, SD = .79), concerning pressure from either the university or students to improve the students' SWU-SET scores.

Essentially, an analysis of the introspective think-aloud reveals that the teachers were aware of the underlying concept of the SWU-SET when planning lessons, selecting and developing supplementary teaching materials, finding exercises, and teaching. These were done to achieve the course objectives and the testing objectives of the SWU-SET, as can be seen in Excerpts 3-4.

Excerpt 3

When planning lessons for listening skills or teaching the skills, I frequently told my students that listening for specific details, such as numbers, addresses, and names, was necessary. This is what students should be able to do at A2 level…

(T1, the introspective think-aloud, June 19, 2020)

Excerpt 4

Question number 18 was asking for a main idea in terms of a heading. We developed the supplementary materials for students to read more effectively. This was included.

(Teacher 4, the introspective think-aloud, June 23, 2020)

4.1.3 Teachers' Practices Indicating the Washback Effects of the SWU-SET on Teaching

The analysis of the qualitative data shows that the washback effects of the SWU-SET on classroom teaching were related to the content of teaching, teaching methods, and time allotment for test preparation.

Washback effects on the content of teaching

The findings from an analysis of the qualitative data show that the teachers strictly followed the curriculum and course objectives. They were aware of the content of teaching that could help students achieve the goals of the SWU-SET. The analysis of classroom materials shows the consistency between the skills and content taught in the classroom and those tested in the SWU-SET, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, and structure. The findings from the analysis of the data from the interview, the introspective think-aloud, the reflective journals, and classroom observations show that the teachers became more aware of teaching learning strategies to students (e.g., listening for the main idea, listening for specific details, reading for the main idea, and reading for specific details), implementing supplementary materials for improving reading skills, and teaching test-taking strategies (e.g., previewing questions, identifying types of questions, guessing from contextual clues, and eliminating distractors), as shown in Excerpts 5-6.

Excerpt 5

> *When we looked at the questions of the reading passage, the first type was the question asking for the main idea of the whole passage. I was sure that I had taught students this type of question in classrooms. ...I taught them how to find the main idea. Therefore, what I taught them would be similar to the questions in the SWU-SET and the students knew how they could find the main idea of the passage. I felt I had fully supported them and prepared them for the SWU-SET.*

> (Teacher 4, the introspective think-aloud, June 23, 2020)

Excerpt 6

> *When you listen to a listening track, there are three strategies you should use. Before you listen, find out what types of information you need to listen for. First, you need to read the question and understand what information they want. So you can look at the question words, such as what, where, when, why, how, how much, how many. For example, when they ask 'what', it means that they are asking for facts or figures.*

> (Teacher 2, classroom observation, February 7, 2020)

Washback effects on teaching methods

An analysis of the reflective journals, the interview and the introspective think-aloud reveal that the SWU-SET encouraged the teachers to use a wide range of teaching approaches and techniques, such as giving explanations, translating, repeating, and scaffolding to develop students' language skills. In particular, they frequently gave explanations on applying the skills taught and repeated their explanations several times so that students could apply the skills by themselves. The analysis of the classroom observations is consistent with the analysis of the previous studies and reveals that the teachers aimed to engage students in learning and practicing language skills so that they could develop students' language skills and prepare students for the SWU-SET, as shown in Excerpts 7-9.

Excerpt 7

> ...When preparing my lessons for the two compulsory courses (SWU 121 and SWU 122), generally, I paid attention to the lessons, skills, and related classroom activities. When I noticed that some of the skills taught in class

were related to the SWU-SET, I would explain how to apply the skills to my students.

(Teacher 1, teacher reflective journal I, January 13, 2020)

Excerpt 8

When you take a test such as the reading part of the SWU-SET or the final examination …you should gain background knowledge about what you are going to read by yourself through skimming. It helps you know what the passage is about. Right? So the first and the best way is skimming the passage....

(Teacher 4, classroom observation, February 14, 2020)

Excerpt 9

I would repeatedly tell them that they could listen to the listening tracks in the SWU-SET only one time. So, they needed to follow my instruction carefully.

(Teacher 2, the introspective think-aloud, June 17, 2020)

Washback effects on time allotment for test preparation

An analysis of the qualitative data shows that the teachers allocated class time to mention the SWU-SET with the purpose of raising students' awareness of the importance of the test and the benefits of learning English. They regularly showed students the connections between what students learned in the classrooms and what was tested in the SWU-SET. Besides, they also kept informing the students about the test date, the test format, and test-taking strategies necessary for the SWU-SET, as shown in Excerpts 10-13.

Excerpt 10

We should help students see the relationship between our teaching and what is tested in the SWU-SET. We should demonstrate that the SWU-SET is important for students' learning in classrooms. For example, when I taught grammar, I raised students' awareness of paying attention to the lessons about important grammar points, such as if-clauses, because they were a part of the tested content of the SWU-SET.

(Teacher 5, personal communication, June 27, 2020)

Excerpt 11

> *You have to take the SWU-SET in the next two months. Do you think you are going to sit back and relax? Is it going to help you understand the listening track?*

> (Teacher 1, classroom observation, January 13, 2020)

Excerpt 12

> *I help the students achieve the goals of the SWU-SET by providing them with necessary information: 1) the reasons why they have to take the SWU-SET, 2) the number of parts in the test, and 3) the skills being tested.*

> (Teacher 1, teacher reflective journal II, July 11, 2020)

Excerpt 13

> …Personally, I informed students what areas of English would be tested in the SWU-SET as it is the exit examination. This could raise students' awareness of being in charge of their own learning…

> (Teacher 4, the introspective think-aloud, June 23, 2020)

Discussion

This study has shown that the SWU-SET induced the teachers to achieve the course objectives and the test objectives. The teachers planned and taught the teaching content, utilized specific teaching approaches, and set aside time for test preparation in the classroom to serve such objectives. In particular, the teachers were aware of the underlying concept of the SWU-SET, which was based on the CEFR and its descriptors. This made the teachers have clear goals of teaching English for communicative purposes which were aligned with the underlying concepts and, of course, would be beneficial to students' further studies and future careers after graduation. The teachers were highly likely to apply a variety of teaching methods to help students to develop their communicative competence rather than follow scopes and sequences suggested in the coursebook (Wall & Alderson, 1993). Besides, they also reinforced learning strategies, especially reading and listening skills, taught test-taking strategies, and used appropriate supplementary materials to help students improve English skills more effectively. In addition, the

teachers set aside part of the class time for giving students information about the SWU-SET, emphasizing its importance and providing them with activities that could help promote their English skills and help them perform well on the test (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Lunrasri, 2014; Shohamy et al., 1996). It appears that the teachers utilized the SWU-SET as an instrumental motivator to encourage students to pay more attention to learning in the classroom and to gradually be more responsible for their own learning of English. Therefore, it is obvious that the SWU-SET helps induce intended washback effects on teaching.

In order to promote intended washback effects of language tests on teaching, teachers should integrate the information about the tests into their teaching routine. Teachers may start by utilizing the test characteristics in classroom activities, and later, they may apply the test results to students' language development (Webb, 2002). By doing so, teachers would realize the link between teaching and assessment which eventually support students' language learning in achieving their learning goals. This means that teachers play a significant role by supporting students' learning, finding teaching methods which they can use to nourish students' learning, and giving them advice on how to deal with tests (Sriwilaijaroen & Piamsai, 2018).

In Thai educational contexts, teachers usually feel anxious, nervous, and pressured to boost students' test scores, especially those of high-stakes tests, because the test scores could have an effect on teachers' salaries and promotion (Imsa-ard, 2020). This can lead teachers to teach to the test. Surprisingly, the findings show that the teachers neither felt such pressure nor appeared to teach to the test even though they had a clear goal of helping students achieve the objectives of the course and the SWU-SET. They were aware that there were plenty of alternatives available for students to meet the graduation requirements according to the university policy on the exit requirements. For example, to fulfill the requirements, students may choose to take a remedial English course or submit test results from another standardized test (i.e., TOEFL, IELTS, or TOEIC). It can be inferred that to avoid unintended washback and to promote effective teaching, policy-makers should not use high-stakes tests as the only motivation or indicator of success. Giving a variety of alternatives could both lessen teachers' tension and promote effective teaching (Imsa-ard, 2020).

Implications

The findings of this study can inform researchers of a number of implications:

First, teachers should be aware of making a connection between curriculum, teaching, learning, and tests in their teaching routines. When teachers understand the connections, they can design appropriate lessons and adjust their instruction to help students achieve both course objectives and testing objectives (Tang & Fu, 2019; Turner, 2005). For example, teachers can use the underlying concepts of the test for planning lessons, applying proper teaching methods, utilizing appropriate teaching materials, and arranging classroom activities. Therefore, teachers' awareness of the connections between teaching, learning, and tests can improve the quality of learning and teaching in classrooms.

Second, teachers should make use of the washback effects of the high-stakes tests to motivate and reinforce students' learning. High-stakes tests usually have influences on students' learning and can motivate students to learn tested concepts, content or skills (Ferman, 2014; Kılıçkaya, 2016). Teachers could help students see how learning objectives in a course, English skills and course content are related to the high-stakes tests' objectives (Turner, 2005). They should also remind students of the high-stakes tests' objectives being tested and their features (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Lunrasri, 2014; Tsagari, 2011). These could motivate students to pay more attention to learning in the classroom and also outside the classroom.

Next, policy-makers should provide students with various options to meet requirements rather than depending on high-stakes test results only in order to avoid unintended washback effects. To illustrate, designating a high-stakes test as an exit examination and a requirement for graduation or for accountability purposes for higher education institutions could possibly drive teachers to induce unintended washback effects. It is highly likely that teachers teach to the tests (Ali et al., 2020; Rahman et al., 2021; Tsagari, 2011) or review test materials (Gennaro, 2017) to help students gain high test scores because they feel pressured by school administrators and students to boost students' test scores (Imsa-ard, 2020). Therefore, it would be better to allow students or teachers to have different options to meet requirements rather than test scores alone.

Finally, think-aloud is suggested as an effective alternative research instrument for washback studies. As washback consists of nuanced processes, this method allows researchers to learn what is in teachers' minds while performing a task (Afflerbach, 2002). During the think-aloud, teachers are given prompts (i.e., test items, the course syllabus, policies and regulations) to remind them of what they have planned to do. Their verbal reports also allow researchers to visualize and understand the actual reasoning underlying teachers' thinking and decision making rather than what they say they do. Therefore, think-aloud is an instrument which can be used to investigate a cognitive process in washback effect research studies more effectively than other tools (Nunan & Bailey, 2009).

Conclusion

This study has shown that the SWU-SET, which is the criterion for the exit examination, generally induces intended washback effects on teaching. Its underlying concept, or the CEFR, helped the teachers teach students to achieve the course objectives and the testing objectives of the SWU-SET. The teachers were aware of promoting students' learning through the reinforcement of learning strategies, allowing students to practice English skills frequently, and spending class time wisely. In particular, the reinforcement of learning strategies in the EFL context will be beneficial for students' learning inside and outside of classrooms (Prakongchati, 2012). By doing so, teachers can inspire and motivate students to be responsible for their own learning, which can promote their lifelong learning. This study has proved that teachers' knowledge is the mediator between tests and teaching, so they should regularly participate in professional training programs to help them teach more effectively. Policy-makers can also support the quality of teaching by providing teachers with opportunities to focus on teaching. Moreover, this study has shown that implementing the introspective think-aloud reveals specific strategies utilized by the teachers to make a connection between tests and teaching. Therefore, researchers who are interested in washback should consider the introspective think-aloud as an alternative instrument that can be used in order to gain a better understanding of washback.

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Appendix A

Information Concerning the Selected Participants

Assigned Name for Teachers	Age	Gender	Highest Academic Qualification	Area of Research Interest
Teacher 1	45	Female	Ph.D. in English as an International Language	Language teaching, Media Literacy
Teacher 2	38	Female	Ph.D. in English as an International Language	Language teaching, Genre Analysis
Teacher 3	33	Female	Ph.D. in English as an International Language	English linguistics and Instruction, phonology
Teacher 4	38	Male	Ph.D. in English Language Teaching	World English/ English as a Lingua Franca/ Intercultural Communication /English Language Teaching Pedagogy/ English Language Learning Strategies
Teacher 5	41	Male	Ph.D. in English Language Teaching	Literary Stylistics Discourse Studies Corpus Linguistics English for Specific Purposes