Interlanguage Pragmatic Test Tasks: Does a Low-Stakes Test Have Washback to L2 Teachers and Learners?

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Despite the international surge of interest in the measurement of L2 pragmatic competence, the washback of pragmatic test tasks has remained a noticeably under-researched issue. To bridge this gap, this study sought to investigate the washback of a written discourse completion task (WDCT), as a pragmatic measure, to L2 teachers and learners in two different testing contexts, i.e., one with the addition of WDCT as part of summative assessment (pragmatic testing context) and the other with no such addition to the tests (non-pragmatic testing context). Data from teacher and learner interviews and classroom observations were subjected to content analysis. The results revealed various aspects of pragmatic assessment washback. First, the added pragmatic test tasks in the pragmatic testing context enhanced learners' noticing of pragmatic aspects of listening materials and teacher talk, whereas learners in the non-pragmatic testing context expressed more concern for lexical and grammatical features. Second, pragmatic context learners specified the production of pragmatically appropriate discourse as the ultimate objective of language learning. Finally, most teachers in the pragmatic testing context emphasized the utility of pragmatic-based teaching activities. The findings indicate that low-stakes pragmatic assessment has a positive washback to learning and teaching activities.

Keywords: interlanguage pragmatics, pragmatic competence, pragmatic tests, washback, discourse completion tasks

Introduction

The washback effect of language tests can narrow the content of the educational curriculum and specify the what and how of language teaching and learning in the classroom (Andrews, 2004; Hamp-Lyons, 1997). Pragmatic testing seems to have proved its status among other types of language test types in the language testing literature due to the recent increase of studies in interlanguage pragmatic testing (e.g., Brown & Ahn, 2011; Roever, 2005; Yamashita, 2005). Despite a large number of washback studies in language testing (e.g., Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Green, 2006; Hawkey, 2006; Xiao, Sharpling, & Liu, 2011), pragmatic tests items have received little attention in washback studies. This study investigates the washback effect of a written discourse completion task (WDCT), as one of the frequent measures of L2 learners' interlanguage pragmatic competence, on L2 teachers and learners.

Research Background

Washback: Concept and Participants

Several definitions of the term "washback" have emerged over the years in the literature on language testing. Andrews (2004, p. 37) uses the term "washback" to refer to "the effects of tests on teaching and learning, the educational system, and various stakeholders in the education process." Similarly, Shohamy, Donitsa-Schmidt, and Ferman (1996, p. 298) argue that washback is "the connections between testing and learning." This connection can be in terms of "curricular alignment" (Shepard, 1993), which occurs when there is a match between the content and format of a test and the curricular program. However, the idea of alignment has been criticized as a threat to the validity of the test as it may change what is designed to be tested into what was decided from the curriculum to be appropriate as testing points

(Widen, O'shea, & Pye, 1997, cited in Cheng & Curtis, 2004).

Washback has a bidirectional effect, i.e., positive or negative. As the ultimate goal for language test developers, positive washback gives rise to beneficial changes in teaching by examinations which are closely linked to measurement-driven instruction (Cheng & Curtis, 2004). By contrast, negative washback results from the use of a test construct or format informed by a narrow definition of language ability. This, in turn, restricts the teaching /learning context (Taylor, 2005).

It is now believed "that washback involves complex interactions between tests, teachers and learners, which determine whether individuals will embrace or reject intended changes." (Greeen, 2006, p. 114). Test takers will be affected in three general aspects in the testing procedure: 1) the experience of taking and preparing for the test; 2) the feedback the test takers receive about their performance on tests; and 3) the decision made about the test takers based on their test scores (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). In addition, teachers are affected by language tests since they, to a great extent, cannot refrain from 'teaching to the test' because most teachers regard their students' performance in tests as that of their own (Hamp-Lyons, 1997). This may become more evident when there is a change in normal testing procedure or method. When an innovation or a change occurs in language testing, the main question then is: Can teachers understand the underlying principles of the test? or Can teachers understand changes they should make in their teaching procedure to help their learners perform better in the test? Wall (2000) believes that most teachers are unaware of these principles due to such factors as poor classroom conditions and limited time available for English lessons. Another problem arises when there are few rewards for teachers who seek to change their teaching style based on the requirements of the new test items and the pressure on them by students and their parents to move back to traditional models of teaching language, especially in less communicative teaching contexts. Teachers willingly change their lesson content based on the test more than their methodology and beliefs about teaching (Wall, 2000). Another factor underlying the incomplete washback to

teachers is that teachers' expectation is different from that of learners in some respect (Hawkey, 2006).

Washback of language tests can help language teachers revise the curriculum and assessment procedure to provide language learners with a better route for learning on the one hand and indirectly control the learning process on the other. Besides, it will raise language learners' awareness about the most important aspects of language learning. One important aspect of language learning which seems to need such alignment is pragmatic competence and interlanguage pragmatics. This competence can be assessed by means of pragmatic assessment tasks which have gained recognition in language testing studies (for a comprehensive discussion, see Kasper & Rose, 2002).

Pragmatic Assessment and Pragmatic Test Tasks

The importance of pragmatic competence in language teaching and learning has been noticed by many scholars, including Bardovi-Harlig and Griffin (2005), Chang (2010), and Rose (2000, 2009), among others. Although there are many studies on interlanguage pragmatics in second language acquisition, very little has been done on pragmatic assessment (Roever, 2006). This scarcity of pragmatic representation in language tests can be identified even in communicative language testing, which sees pragmatic proficiency as one important dimension of communicative language ability based on models by Bachman (1990), Bachman and Palmer (1996), and Purpura (2004).

Attempts to devise tests to assess interlanguage pragmatic proficiency of language learners have resulted in at least six measures (Hudson, Detmer, & Brown, 1995; Roever, 2005; Yamashita, 1996), namely written discourse completion tasks, multiple-choice discourse completion tasks, oral discourse completion tasks, role play, role play discourse tasks, and role play self-assessments. One of the most prevalent pragmatic assessment measures is the written discourse completion task (WDCT) in which a situation is described

to the learners and they are asked to fill out the discourse with appropriate speech acts based on the situation, social status of the interlocutors, background knowledge, etc. (Brown, 2001). As the modified version of these tasks, WDCTs with rejoinders consist of a description of a situation following a dialog with one of the interlocutor's speech left as blank. The ones with no rejoinder only include the description of a situation to which the students should provide a response.

The advent of these different methods of interlanguage pragmatic assessment motivated researchers like Hudson et al. (1995) to do method comparison studies in terms of their effect on final scores, replicated by Yamashita (1996) and followed by Brown (2001). They found acceptable reliability for all the pragmatic assessment tasks except for multiple-choice discourse completion tasks. Brown and Ahn (2011) did a thorough investigation on four of these tests and provided recommendations on issues like the number of different raters, item functions, item types, and item characteristics so as to increase the dependability of the tests. Among these tasks, WDCT has received more attention in studies in view of its advantages. As Kwon (2004) contends, WDCT allows respondents to vary their responses according to the features embedded into the WDCT situation, including interlocutors' power and status. Furthermore, WDCT elicits the typical response occurring in real-life situations. Despite this, WDCT suffers from disadvantages, including the possible differences between speech act intended by test tasks and one produced by language test takers (Yamashita, 2005) and low practicality as WDCT needs human raters, which makes the rating process slow and subjective (Brown, 2001).

The focus of all the aforementioned studies were on psychometric characteristics of pragmatic assessment test tasks, while what is missing in the literature is a focus on the washback of pragmatic test tasks to teaching and learning.

Washback of Pragmatic Test Tasks: An Overlooked Phenomenon

Cheng and Curtis (2004) classified washback studies into two primary lines of research: 1) the washback effect of high-stakes tests, and 2) the modification of a specific test or examination as having a positive influence on teaching and learning. Most studies in the former mainly focused on popular high-stakes exams such as TOEFL (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Hamp-Lyons, 1998), IELTS (Green, 2006; Hayes & Read, 2004; Saville & Hawkey, 2004), and some other tests like national tests (Luxia, 2005). Adopting the latter line, Andrews, Fullilove, and Wong (2002) examined the effect of the addition of an oral exam to the "Use of English (UE)" exam. Their findings indicated the influence of the introduction of the UE Oral on students' performance in spoken English. However, it was found that the washback of the UE Oral varied from student to student. In some cases, as Andrews et al.'s study showed, the improved performance was only superficial, such as students' attention to the requirements of the exam format or their production of memorized phrases.

In another study, Lee (2009) investigated the washback of implementation of school-based assessment (SBA) to students' performance in the public oral examination. Statistically, the SBA component proved to be as reliable as the speaking examination. Lee's study showed the positive washback of SBA in students' speaking examination. This included a lower absentee rate of candidates from schools submitting SBA marks as well as their better performance in the speaking examination. A similar study was conducted by Muñoz and Álvarez (2010) to investigate the washback of an oral assessment system to some areas of English teaching and learning. It compared an experimental group and a comparison group though a mixed-methods design. Data collected through teacher and student surveys, class observations, and external evaluations of students' oral performance showed positive washback in some areas. Muñoz and Álvarez concluded that the ongoing support and guidance are of high importance for a new testing system to have positive and beneficial washback.

Our current understanding of the washback of pragmatic test tasks to language learners and teachers and the consequences such test tasks have in the language instruction context remains insufficient. Pragmatic test tasks and their possible consequences in language learning and teaching have remained under-researched in the washback literature. Moreover, as pragmatic test tasks are a new type of testing, only very few language centers have incorporated this type of test in their assessment tasks despite the fact that great attention is paid to developing learners' interlanguage pragmatics in language teaching materials. This gave the researchers the motivation to investigate the probable washback of pragmatic tests to learners, teachers, and teaching programs.

Research Purpose

This study aimed to examine the washback of pragmatic test tasks, mainly written discourse completion tasks, embedded in the mid-term and final examinations. The study sought to investigate whether pragmatic washback would occur as a result of these tests, and if so, to explain its nature, quality, and rationale. To achieve the aims of this study, the following questions were formulated:

1) What views do EFL teachers and learners hold as to the importance of pragmatic test tasks in classroom language assessment?
2) What washback effect does the addition of pragmatic test tasks to classroom summative language assessment have on teachers' teaching activities and learners' learning focus in EFL classrooms?

Method

Participants

A sample of 40 Iranian EFL learners and 10 non-native Iranian EFL teachers from two private language centers (20 students and 5 teachers from each language center) with Persian as their first language were selected using the stratified random sampling technique. In selecting the teachers, care was taken to choose those who taught students of the same proficiency level so that more valid comparison could be made. They were comprised of male and female teachers with 5 to 10 years of language teaching experience, with the mean of 7.2 years, and held a B.A. in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). The teachers had not received instruction on pragmatic teaching and testing at the institute and had not passed any course on pragmatics in their B.A. program. However, their B.A. program was focused on English language teaching, whereby they had a general understanding of pragmatics and pragmatic competence. The language learners were males and females, and their ages ranged from 18 to 23 years with the mean of 21.5 years. They were all at the pre-intermediate level of language proficiency measured by Oxford Placement Test (2006) in both language centers and had at least two consecutive years of English learning experience.

Research Setting

Randomly selected from the available centers, one center embedded WDCT into mid-term and final exams, while the other didn't. Both language centers provided only general English courses concentrating on the four language skills for everyday English communication. One center, hereafter called the pragmatic testing context, had offered general English courses for seven years and managed the courses for 300 students each semester at the time of the study. The main course book taught there was the *Top Notch* series (Saslow & Ascher, 2006). This center had added pragmatic test tasks,

i.e., WDCT, to its quizzes, midterm, and final exams for about a year (4 semesters). The pragmatic test tasks made up of about 25% of the total score of the exams. Each WDCT item consisted of the description of a situation to which students were supposed to provide an appropriate response. The situations were related to those covered in the course book. These WDCT items measured appropriate formulaic expressions, formality and politeness strategies learners need to draw on in different social situations. As this study measured the washback of the WDCTs after they had been introduced into the testing system of the center, the researchers had no control over their development. However, the WDCT items were piloted for the appropriateness of their pragmatic content and language by test developers in the language center before being administered to the target language learners (personal communication, November 2015). The following is an example of these test tasks:

At the boss's office

A clerk (Jack) has a meeting with his boss. He is late because he had an accident while he was driving the company car. Everyone is O.K.

> Jack: I'm terribly sorry I'm late. I had an accident
> Boss: Really? I hope that's not too serious.
> Jack: …………………………………………………
> Boss: Thank goodness.

The other center, hereafter called the non-pragmatic testing context, had already offered general English courses for five years, with an average of 250 students each semester. It did not incorporate any pragmatic sections in its tests and adopted the *In Contact* series (Denman, 2000) as the main course book for its language classes.

Classes in both language centers consisted of 10 to 15 students. In both centers, newly enrolled students had to sit the Oxford Placement Test to be

placed in different language proficiency levels from beginner to advanced. In addition, the teachers in both centers became familiar with the concept of pragmatics and pragmatic instruction in their teacher preparation courses. However, the learners had no experience of pragmatic instruction prior to the introduction of WDCTs.

Instrumentation and Procedure

To gather data, classroom observations, field notes, and two sets of teacher and student structured interviews (one for each language center) were designed and conducted to qualitatively investigate the washback effect of the addition of pragmatic test tasks on teachers' and students' perceptions.

Observation and field notes

Observations in both centers were made before interviewing the teachers to discover the focus of teaching activities and their degree of emphasis on pragmatic features. The teachers of both groups were observed for 12 weeks, and for almost 8 hours each. Since observation was done as a normal professional activity in both centers by the supervisor or the colleagues, the teachers were not informed about the purpose of the observations and field notes. Additionally, they were not told about the time of the observations or which of their classes were to be observed. This was to prevent teachers from changing their usual teaching activities. However, to control the comparison of the teachers' performance, attempts were made to observe classes with the same teaching topics and levels. The purpose of observations was to find out the overall focus of the teachers in their classroom and to cross check their answers to the interview questions. In order to capture the details, notes of the observations were made.

Interviews

The interview questions, following Green (2006), generally focused on teachers' and learners' perceptions of the newly added pragmatic test tasks in the pragmatic testing context and potential changes in teachers' teaching procedures and activities, as well as the learners' learning process. The interviews were conducted individually in one-hour English sessions with each student and teacher. They were encouraged to elaborate on their responses to generate in-depth data.

The teacher interviews encompassed two main parts. The first part, three closed questions, sought to find out teachers' perceptions of the significant points influencing their teaching activities and the main focus in their classes by rating some pre-arranged factors. The second part, 10 open-ended questions, aimed to elicit (a) teachers' attitudes about the significance of WDCT and its purpose, (b) any probable change in teacher's teaching activities after the inclusion of WDCTs in the classroom tests, (c) teachers' evaluation of the effect of WDTCs on encouraging more attention to pragmatic aspects of the input, (d) the importance of students' production of different speech acts appropriately in classroom activities, and (e) teachers' ideas on the suitability of testing pragmatic competence, especially in quizzes and final exams.

The student interview questions had different foci for pragmatic and non-pragmatic testing contexts. The reason for designing two sets of questions for the two centers was that the teachers and learners had different teaching and learning experiences. The pragmatic testing context interview focused on students' ideas about (a) the importance of acquiring pragmatic competence, (b) the difficulty of WDCTs, (c) the possible differences between this test task and other test tasks, (d) the factors that helped them answer WDCTs (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, teachers' techniques and method of teaching, etc.), (e) the rate of attention they paid to pragmatics inside and outside the classroom and its rationale, and (f) their awareness of the demands of DCTs during their studies prior to taking the exam. However, the non-pragmatic context

interview questions inquired into students' understanding of the need to achieve pragmatic competence, its significance in language use, and their degree of attention to speech acts. All the interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed for analysis.

Data Analysis

The current study implemented both quantitative and qualitative analyses to examine the washback of WDCTs. For qualitative analysis, content analysis procedure was applied to extract themes from data collected in teacher and learner interview, observations, and field notes of both the pragmatic and non-pragmatic testing contexts. To reconfirm the validity of the extracted themes, another rater who was familiar with concepts in pragmatics and washback was asked to analyze the interview data. The two analyses yielded common themes with no major variation across the two ratings. For quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics were used to calculate the relative frequency and percentage of the themes emerging in the qualitative phase of data analysis.

Results

Teachers' and Learners' Perceptions of Pragmatic Assessment

Data analysis of teachers' and learners' perceptions of the importance of pragmatic test tasks in classroom language assessment revealed that most of the teachers perceived the pragmatic test section to be necessary and influential in improving the learning process. Table 1 illustrates teachers' views.

As Table 1 shows, 80% of teachers in the pragmatic testing context explained that by testing speech act production, they could inform language learners where and how to appropriately use different linguistic forms in spontaneous language production. One of these teachers argued:

Although it seems difficult at first, as soon as the language learners find out vocabulary and grammar knowledge cannot help them in answering such items, they will become eager to learn speech acts.

TABLE 1
Teachers' Perception of the Role of Pragmatic Test Tasks in a Language Test

Items	*n*	*%*
Pragmatic Testing Context Teachers		
It is essential to test pragmatic proficiency and ability of language learners.	4	80
By testing the production of pragmatic language ability teachers could teach language learners how and where to use different linguistic forms appropriately.	3	60
Pragmatic test tasks may assess learners' creativity.	3	60
Pragmatic test tasks may assess spontaneous language production in different language use situations.	4	80
Pragmatic test tasks in the test would increase language learners' thinking skills.	4	80
Non-pragmatic Testing Context Teachers		
It is essential to test pragmatic proficiency of language learners.	3	60
Such pragmatic test tasks are needed in L2 exams.	3	60
The inclusion of pragmatic items would raise language learners' consciousness of this important aspect of language learning, i.e., interlanguage pragmatic competence.	2	40

They assumed pragmatic items in the test would increase language learners' thinking skills while arguing that WDCTs were a little difficult. Besides, they regarded this test task to be helpful in learning. Two of the teachers stated:

These questions can help learners create something and think better about different situations. They can work as an eye-opener for learners

> *to see the things better for future learning.*
> *These questions put the learners in natural situations so that they can feel language. But they should be coupled with other types of questions.*

As seen from Table 1, inclusion of the pragmatic test task, as some teachers viewed it, may raise learners' awareness about the importance of interlanguage pragmatic competence. One teacher from the non-pragmatic testing context postulated:

> *If we add such questions to our tests, learners will see the importance of the use of language in real life situations and that this aspect of language is not fun. This is the most important aim of English teaching. Adding such questions can affect learners positively in that it may make learners conscious about the existence of this aspect of language, speech acts, and make them focus on this part in their studies.*

With regard to the views of EFL learners on the issue, data analysis revealed that 85% of the pragmatic testing context learners found the pragmatic test task as not very difficult or not difficult at all (Table 2). They alluded to the open-ended nature of the task, which did not require any fixed or predetermined answers, as the reason for the ease of responding. They further said that, as they knew beforehand that these test items would be included in their exam, the test task did not put them in a stressful situation. About 75 % of the students in this group explained that these items tested the learners' ability to integrate their otherwise separate knowledge of vocabulary and grammar in conversations.

The learners from the pragmatic testing context stressed that their attention to the teacher's instruction as well as practicing vocabulary, grammar, and conversation patterns enhanced their performance on the pragmatic section of exams. 80% of learners pointed out that their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and target culture coupled with their background knowledge of the discourse being tested enabled them to complete WDCTs. This shows that

the washback of the pragmatic test task encouraged the learners in the pragmatic testing context to consider vocabulary and grammar only as one part of language ability, the knowledge of which was not sufficient to cope with the challenge of the pragmatic test.

TABLE 2
Learners' Perception of the Role of Pragmatic Test Tasks in a Language Test

Items	*n*	*%*
Pragmatic Testing Context Learners		
Pragmatic test tasks are different from other test items.	14	70
Pragmatic test tasks are not difficult.	17	85
Answering pragmatic test tasks is stressful.	3	15
Pragmatic test tasks will evaluate the learners' conversational vocabulary and grammar.	15	75
Knowledge of vocabulary and grammar and the target culture can help answering pragmatic test tasks.	17	85
Non-pragmatic Testing Context Learners		
Learning to use pragmatics is important.	3	15
It is essential to pay attention to pragmatic features in the teaching input while learning English.	4	20

However, as the whole exam, in principle, had a non-pragmatic focus, these learners mostly reported working both on vocabulary and grammar and on conversational patterns to prepare themselves for the pragmatic section of the exam:

> *I try to practice vocabulary and grammar to answer these questions. My general knowledge helps me as well.*
> *I use both my knowledge of conversations and dialogues from the book [i.e., Top Notch] to answer these questions. The sentences and vocabularies in the dialogues from the book help me a lot.*

Pragmatic testing context learners' gave attention to the components of language in order to achieve better performance on the pragmatic test tasks;

however, few learners (15%) in the non-pragmatic testing context saw pragmatics as an important aspect of language learning.

Pragmatic Washback to Teaching and Learning Activities

Analysis of the interviews and classroom observations regarding the washback effect of the addition of the pragmatic test task on teaching activities revealed that most of the teachers, i.e., as many as 4, in the pragmatic testing context changed their teaching practice subsequent to the addition of pragmatic test tasks to mid-term and final exams. They reported on the teaching activities they implemented after the introduction of the pragmatic test tasks. One teacher in this group remarked that he created a particular situation for his students to speak on the topic related to the theme of the course book unit. Another teacher, in this group, went further and commented that:

> I use my imagination and ask my students to close their eyes and imagine they are in a place that everybody understands just English. Then, I bring up a situation and ask my students to produce appropriate sentences.

Table 3 summarizes the observation results for different activities teachers used in both pragmatic and non-pragmatic contexts.

TABLE 3
Activities Used by Pragmatic and Non-pragmatic Context Teachers to Enhance Pragmatic Learning.

Classroom Activity	PTC[*]	NPTC[**]
Practicing conversations in pair-work or group-work as students only read aloud the dialogue	✓	✓
Asking students to make new dialogs based on some new pictures related to the theme of the unit and the real-life	✓	

	*	**
experience of the language learners		
Integrating fun and pleasure in conversations	✓	✓
Designing free discussions (students will have enough time to think and learn by listening to other students and make their own answers)	✓	
Assigning roles to students accompanied by instructions on what they should do to perform the roles	✓	✓
Correcting language learners' pragmatic errors in using speech act appropriately	✓	
Using multimedia (with themes related to what language learners like or have background knowledge in)	✓	
Making use of actual events in class and using related speech acts	✓	
Over focusing on vocabulary and grammar as the aim of supplementary materials		✓

Note. * pragmatic testing context, ** non-pragmatic testing context

As Table 3 indicates, teachers in pragmatic testing context used more activities to prepare their students to develop their interlanguage pragmatic competence. Furthermore, the analysis of the students' interviews in the pragmatic testing context produced evidence of the efficacy of these activities. 87% of the students found the activities necessary and effective because they helped them answer pragmatic test items more easily. The language learners in the pragmatic testing context unanimously noted that their teachers worked on pragmatic proficiency in their teaching activities. The language learners' remarks can be summarized as follows:

1) The teacher uses the activities which are the same as the test items.
2) The teacher encourages the students to use speech acts, such as greetings, invitations, and apologies, appropriately.

These findings show that the addition of WDCTs to midterm and final exams brought about a positive washback to both teachers' instructional activities and learners' focus on pragmatic features of the input. This functioned as a type of hidden pragmatic curriculum to the teaching program which had no focus on pragmatic features prior to the introduction of WDCTs in exams.

Content analysis of learner interviews showed washback to learning activities in and outside the classroom (Table 4). According to the table, 65 percent of language learners in the pragmatic testing context pointed out that their attention to dialogs and conversations in the classroom made them more successful in performing the pragmatic test tasks. The two extracts below are illustrative:

> *The dialogues and conversation taught by the teacher is always the answer of [sic] these questions in the exam.*
> *In these questions we should make some sentences about a situation being always about the dialogs from the book.*

TABLE 4

Washback to Learning Activities

Learning Activity		PTC[*]		NPTC[**]	
		n	$\%$	n	$\%$
Use of the Internet and watching English movies	With the focus on mechanical aspects of language, such as vocabulary	5	25	16	80
	With the focus on pragmatic features, such as speech act and politeness	15	75	4	20
Reading English short stories and magazines	With the focus on mechanical aspects of language, such as vocabulary	3	15	15	75
	With the focus on pragmatic features, such as speech act and politeness	17	85	5	25

Paying attention to dialogues and conversations in class	13	65	6	30
Paying attention to pragmatic features, such as speech acts and politeness, in different classroom activities	15	75	4	20

Note. [*] pragmatic testing context, [**] non-pragmatic testing context

Seventy-five percent of the students in the pragmatic testing context reported that they were attracted to pragmatic features like speech acts due to their importance in language learning. Such importance, in their eyes, could be the result of activities used by pragmatic testing context teachers to aid their students in performing well on the pragmatic test tasks in the class. In contrast, as Table 4 clearly depicts, the lack of pragmatic test tasks in the non-pragmatic testing context influenced the learners' learning focus. This influence is evident in their interest in reading English short stories and magazines outside of class to improve predominantly their vocabulary knowledge. Emphasis on vocabulary, as shown in the table, is evident in the two extracts below about watching English movies:

> *I like to watch English movies and read English short stories. I think they can be very helpful in improving my English. ... I look mostly for the new words while watching English movies. I write them down by looking at the subtitles and check their meanings later. Then I try to use the new words when I speak with my friends.*

> *I mainly search for new words whether in my story books or in other places. Whenever I see a new word I write it down in my notebook or if the word is familiar to me I think about it and try to remember its meaning.*

These findings demonstrate that, although learners in the non-pragmatic group stressed speaking and communication, their main focus was on vocabulary rather than on the speech acts and pragmatic features of what they watched or listened to. Unlike pragmatic learners, not all language learners in the non-pragmatic group attended to pragmatic features in the classroom.

Discussion

This study aimed to investigate teachers' and learners' attitudes toward the inclusion of a pragmatic subtest in L2 learners' exams. Commenting on pragmatic tests in general, the teachers in both contexts asserted that L2 learners' pragmatic development should be assessed. This indicates teachers' awareness of pragmatic assessment, particularly in an EFL context where such assessment may result in curriculum alignment by encouraging teachers and students to allocate part of teacher focus on pragmatic development. The observation that the inclusion of pragmatic test tasks in the language center's assessment inspired learners to notice pragmatic features in the instruction is in line with many washback studies documenting the positive effect of tests on students learning focus (Andrews, Fullilove, & Wong, 2002; Muñoz & Álvarez, 2010). Although this is particularly true of high-stakes exams, the data in this study reveal that such effects on noticing in the learning process happen even when the exam is a low-stakes one.

On the other hand, although teachers in the non-pragmatic context had observed no changes in assessment policy, they deemed pragmatic tests very important and stressed the need for their inclusion. The emphasis of both groups on pragmatic assessment is indicative of ELT teachers' general pragmatic awareness, not necessarily raised by mainstream assessment

policies in their language center and nor, in the case of non-pragmatic context group, shaped by the washback of a pragmatic assessment in their teaching environment.

The findings related to the washback of the pragmatic test task to teaching activities revealed the great changes made by teachers in the pragmatic context to highlight pragmatic features in course books. Being aware of the demands of the pragmatic subtest in midterm and final exams, they realigned their teaching activities toward more pragmatic oriented activities with a communicative nature and similar to those found in the pragmatic subtest. This positive washback is in line with the general premise of washback which envisages the effect of tests on curriculum alignment and teaching focus (Wall & Alderson, 1993); however, the findings of this study contrast those in which even high-stakes tests produced negative effect or were not found to have any considerable effect on learning/teaching activates (Andrews, 1995; Bracey, 1987; Cheng, 1998; Frederiksen, 1984; Luxia, 2005; Özmen, 2011).

Further, this study challenges the common postulation that washback to teaching primarily falls within the scope of high-stakes exams (e.g., Alderson & Wall, 1993; Andrews, 1995; Andrews, Fullilove, & Wong, 2002) to the effect that tests without important consequence will not have washback (Alderson & Wall, 1993). It challenges this from two perspectives. First, washback can be very strong in the case of low-stakes tests, so it deserves to be studied in non-high-stakes testing contexts. Second, EFL teachers are so conscious of the knowledge and skills their students need for successful test performance that they deem it appropriate to modify their teaching activities to cope with test demands. This becomes more evident when the teaching focus in the pragmatic testing context is compared with that in the non-pragmatic one. As teachers' teaching practice in the latter group shows, despite emphasizing the importance of pragmatic instruction, they paid comparatively little attention to pragmatic instruction due to the negative washback of the test not comprising any pragmatic subtest. Instead, they emphasized grammar and vocabulary teaching activities.

As for pragmatic washback to learning, the reports by learners in the

pragmatic group manifested the positive washback of the pragmatics test tasks to them, as previously documented with other components of language proficiency (e.g., Muñoz & Álvarez, 2010). To enhance their performance on the test, they adopted two learning strategies. Outside class, they tried to increase their pragmatic proficiency through reading authentic Internet materials and watching movies. Moreover, they utilized an advanced organizer strategy to maximize their attention to conversations in the textbook and other in-class materials which they thought to be good input for pragmatic development. The washback of the pragmatic test task, however, acted beyond the reshaping of the learner focus and directing it toward test-oriented activities. Learner interviews indicate that the pragmatic test section made them aware of the contribution of proper speech act use to effective communication. This can be considered as macro-level, higher-order washback to the very learning of an L2. In other words, the learners, strongly influenced by pragmatic washback, were not just inspired to learn to test. Rather, they came to develop metapragmatic awareness which was strong enough to reshape their learning process to encompass activities required for pragmatic development.

By contrast, lack of the pragmatic subtest in the non-pragmatic test context had an influential negative washback to the learners in the non-pragmatic context. Whereas the teachers, due to their general educational background, were somehow conscious of pragmatic proficiency, the learners were ignorant of this component of communicative language ability. Consequently, they considered grammar and vocabulary as the main components of the learning focus. Although these learners had a general motivation for effective communication, the findings show that lack of the pragmatic subtest acted against their motivation to notice particular pragmatic features. It follows that noticing a language feature is not merely the outcome of input enhancement (Schmidt, 2001; Sharwood Smith, 1981), pushed output (Swain, 1985, 1995; Swain & Lapkin, 1995), or interaction (Long, 1981, 1983, 1996). Tests exert a powerful influence on what learners may notice.

Conclusion

High-stakes tests are considered to be agents for changes in the teaching and learning process (Luxia, 2005). This functions as the premise or commonly accepted belief in most empirical washback studies. Accordingly, as Muñoz and Álvarez (2010) put it, most washback studies have explored the positive or negative effects of standardized tests on different areas such as curriculum, materials, teaching methods, and learners' attitudes. The belief in this premise permeates even the studies reviewing the washback literature. They have solely focused on the impact of high-stakes testing (e.g., Spratt, 2005; Wall, 2000). Low-stakes classroom exams and their washback to teaching and learning practices, however, have gone largely unnoticed, despite the fact that low-stakes exams are tied to the step-by-step attempts of L2 learners to achieve language proficiency. The results of this study manifest the effect of low-stakes exams on teachers and students as the two main participants in the washback process. While studies on high-stakes test washback show mixed findings, this study indicates the crucial role of low-stakes tests on three areas: teachers, learners, and teaching/learning activities. To conclude, in line with Madaus' (1988) argument, testing, rather than the "official'' stated curriculum, increasingly determines what is taught and what is learned. This well documents that washback does not necessarily correspond to the importance of the test. Low-stakes exams may have a very strong washback, while, in contrast to high-stakes tests, they are not used to make important educational and professional decisions which affect people's futures.

A second finding which may make the contribution of this study salient is its incompatibility with the mainstream washback research results. Many of the previous findings attest to the negative effects generated by exams (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Cheng, 1998; Shohamy et al., 1996). The intensively positive washback of the new pragmatic subtest in the present study shows that the nature of the washback effect, positive or negative, is tied to the nature of the exam and the changes in it. For example, in Shohamy

et al.'s (1996) research, the exam generated negative feelings as it was considered to be of no importance. In contrast, the positive washback of the pragmatic subtest to both learners and teachers in the present study emanates from the highly useful, communicatively effective nature of pragmatic competence. Irrespective of the changes in the exam and the incorporation of the pragmatic subtest, the teachers held a high opinion of pragmatic competence as an effective component of communicative language ability. It can be concluded that, among the factors affecting the kind of washback, teachers' and students' beliefs about the language proficiency and its relationship with the exam largely determine their reception of a new exam and its concomitant washback. This implies that any new testing policy should be founded on an understanding of teaching and learning philosophies adhered to by teachers and students. Otherwise, even a change compatible with the construct of communicative language ability and hence envisaged to bring about positive changes may generate great negative washback.

In view of the washback of pragmatic assessment in a low-stakes context, two implications can be drawn. In the first place, this study needs to be replicated in other contexts and with other data collection instruments to produce more findings as to pragmatic washback. Whereas this study was limited to changes to teaching and learning processes, other studies may add to the clarity of the picture of pragmatic washback by investigating learner gains resulting from such a washback effect. Besides, as the results show, low-stakes contexts may be a good topic for washback studies as they manifest the power of testing in the learning process. Hence, the scope of washback research needs to be expanded to move beyond high-stakes contexts as the dominant focus of washback studies. The last implication of the study is curriculum innovation. Pragmatic competence can benefit from explicit instruction. This study showed the impact of a pragmatic subtest on the shaping of great motivation for pragmatic learning. To complete the shaping of such motivation, L2 curriculum should be enhanced, particularly with pragmatic input.

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