

The Washback of Lower Secondary School Examinations in English

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Abstract

The learning and teaching processes are the essences of an educational system. They are characterised by complexity and many-sidedness. More and more often, however, there is a tendency to diminish the consequences of this process to either the marks obtained, or a body of knowledge absorbed, by students. What is absolutely forgotten and neglected is the matter of influence of this process on the way the students' skills and knowledge are tested. Such an influence is called the washback effect. The most common and popular contemporary tool used in the evaluation process is a test. Its external and standardised version has become a significant element of the Polish education system. In 2009, for the first time, lower secondary school students took such an exam in English and, since then, this way of testing has become a relevant part of the Polish educational system. The main goal of the present paper is to observe, examine, and describe the washback effect of lower secondary school examinations in English that are external and standardised. To be able to achieve the chosen goal, the present author decided to design, form, and conduct research based on the existing body of literature of the subject matter. The entire present paper represents the author's attempt to fulfil set goals.

Keywords: washback effect, Lower Secondary School Examinations in English, Lower Secondary School, positive washback, negative washback

Abstrakt

Istotę systemu edukacyjnego bez wątpienia stanowi proces uczenia się i nauczania. Charakteryzuje się on złożonością i wieloaspektowością. Coraz częściej jednak, mamy do czynienia z tendencją polegającą na sprowadzaniu konsekwencji owego procesu jedynie do ocen otrzymanych przez studentów bądź zdobytej przez nich wiedzy. Niestety, całkowicie zaniedbywany jest fakt wpływu procesu uczenia się i nauczania na sposób, w jakim wiedza oraz umiejętności uczniów są sprawdzane. Taki rodzaj wpływu nazywany jest efektem zwrotnym. Jednym z najbardziej powszechnych i popularnych narzędzi używanych współcześnie w procesie oceniania jest test. Jego zestandaryzowana wersja stała się znaczącym elementem polskiego systemu edukacyjnego. W 2009 roku po raz pierwszy w historii odbył się egzamin gimnazjalny z języka angielskiego i od tego czasu właśnie ta metoda testowania stanowi istotną część polskiego systemu edukacyjnego. Głównym celem niniejszej pracy było zaobserwowanie, zbadanie i opisanie efektu zwrotnego egzaminu gimnazjalnego z języka angielskiego. Po to, aby osiągać zamierzone cele autor zdecydował się zaprojektować, stworzyć i przeprowadzić badanie w oparciu o istniejącą literaturę przedmiotu. Cała praca stanowi próbę spełnienia postawionych celów.

Słowa kluczowe: efekt zwrotny, egzamin gimnazjalny z języka angielskiego, gimnazjum, pozytywny efekt zwrotny, negatywny efekt zwrotny

On account of its complexity and variety, the washback effect issue constitutes a demanding and challenging subject of research in foreign language teaching. Moreover, the lack of research on washback, carried out in Polish schools, may hamper the process of analysing and studying the washback effect. Nevertheless, the present author has made an attempt to deal with the subject matter in question.

Research methodology

Before making hypotheses, the theoretical background must be set. The present author decided to choose the definition proposed by Zawadowska-Kittel (2013) who described the washback effect as the influence of exams, intentional or unintentional, positive

and negative, on widely understood learning and teaching processes and all its participants, as well as the whole educational system. Thus, the primary, general hypotheses of the present paper are as follows:

1. The lower secondary school external standardised examination in English does influence the process of teaching in the researched school.
2. The lower secondary school external standardised examination in English does influence the process of learning in the researched school.
3. This washback effect of the lower secondary school external standardised examination in English is both positive and negative for the researched school.
4. The lower secondary school external standardised examination in English does influence the whole educational system in the researched school.
5. The washback of the lower secondary school external standardised examination in English is both intentional and unintentional in the researched school.

Since the hypotheses suggest the influence of the exam on both the teaching and learning process, the present author found it profoundly relevant and necessary to investigate both teachers' and students' behaviours, opinions, and experience. Taking into consideration the indicated complex nature of washback, the author carried out both qualitative and quantitative research. Therefore, the author applied a hybrid research methodology (Wilczyńska and Michońska-Stadnik 2010). Such a solution allowed the use of two different approaches, which not only complement each other, but also have the potential to achieve credible results among two different research groups, that is, teachers and students. Since the number of polled students was meant to be incomparably higher than the number of teachers, the author created a questionnaire which was to be completed by the students. When it comes to teachers, the use of semi-structured interviews was to be implemented. While the questionnaire should provide quantitative data, the interviews ought to offer qualitative results. The quantitative data would be numbers and other quantified answers which let the present author offer a statistical description, whereas qualitative results would not be expressed by numbers but by non-quantified descriptions, opinions, beliefs, and information (Babbie 2007).

The author conducted the research in one of the lower secondary schools in Masovian Voivodeship. Both quantitative and qualitative research was conducted in April 2014: before the external standardised examination in English took place but after the mock examination taken in December 2013. The author had the opportunity to spread self-administered questionnaires to all students who were going to take the external standardised examination in English and who were present at school the day the research was

carried out. Questionnaire completion took students approximately 5 to 10 minutes. Finally, as 47 students participated in research, the study population was bigger than a small group (up to 30 participants) and constituted a medium group (Wilczyńska and Michońska-Stadnik 2010). A medium group analysis should provide the author with more reliable and accurate results.

To describe the research population, 25 male and 22 female students aged between 15 and 16 took part in the research. Almost all of them (93.6%) responded that they took the mock external standardised examination in English as well as that they were going to take the exam on both the basic and extended level (95.7%). Those facts were also confirmed and verified by the author at the school office. Because of the fact that the population was rather homogeneous there was no need to pose additional demographic questions. What is more, the author decided to place demographic questions at the beginning of the self-administered questionnaire, in contrast to dominant methodological practice (Pilch i Bauman 2001) in order to start with safe and easy to answer questions, to greet polled students, and to introduce a forthcoming atmosphere for filling in the questionnaire.

When it comes to teachers, the author was able to interview all three English teachers who taught the above mentioned students. Three semi-structured interviews were conducted. In order not to limit the interlocutors and to create an atmosphere for honest conversation the author decided not to record the interviews. The conversations lasted approximately 45 minutes and took place in a school building. All three teachers were characterised as having a high level of linguistic education. Two of them were women demonstrating 13 and 15 years of experience of working in schools, while the only male teacher had worked in the school for 6 years. The author excluded other demographic groups since, first, there was no methodological need for their inclusion and, second, important personal matters were included in topics of the semi-structured interview. Throughout the paper the teachers are referred to as T1, T2, and T3.

Since convenience sampling was used, its disadvantages had to be taken into consideration. The author could carry out the study with almost all the students and teachers in the school. Such a possibility seems to diminish the mentioned drawbacks of the convenience sampling and turns the research into a case study. The opportunity to analyse all the students and their teachers allowed the author to observe the full picture of the school as far as the external standardised examination in English is concerned.

The positive and negative washback effect on students

The more important the exam is, and the more significant its consequences are, the higher the probability of the washback effect. That is why the author decided to ask students about the future consequences of the examination (Table 5). 46.8% of students agree that the exam will have consequences for their future while 19.1% of them strongly agree with this view. 25.5% of students rather disagree and only 4.3% of them strongly disagree with the presented idea of future consequences.

Table 1. Examination consequences in students' opinions.

Do you think that the examination is going to have consequence for your future?	Frequencies	%
Definitely yes	9	19.1
Rather yes	22	46.8
Rather no	12	25.5
Definitely no	2	4.3
No answer	2	4.3
In total	47	100

Those results show that the external standardised examination in English has future consequences for the majority of the students (65.9%), while almost 30% of them seem not to see the effects of the exam. It is therefore justified to assert that students associate the examination with something that is really important to them. The examination is not perceived as another element of school reality but as a relevant part of their education. This importance may also stem from the future consequences which students attribute to the examination. The students make the examination meaningful, however, the question if they think in such a way because they actually believe in its significance, or whether the entire educational system convinced them of the importance of the examination, remains without answer.

The students were asked to share their expectations of the fair assessment of the examination in English. 14.9% of students definitely agree and 57.4% of them rather agree with the fact that the exam ought to be evaluated fairly. The number of students of different opinions is considerably smaller since 12.8% of students rather disagree and only 4.3% definitely disagree with this idea of a just evaluation. It means that the majority of students (73.2%) expect to obtain fair marks while only a small number of participants (17.1%) do not share their belief.

What we should be reminded of is that one of the positive aspects of the washback effect is the fact that the exam should provide students with fair results. As far as the students' opinions are concerned, as regards to the evaluation, the researched students are mostly convinced that the exam should be assessed justly. This is clear evidence of a washback effect and in this case the effect is positive. As the examination has been in use for many years, and no instances of inaccuracy in evaluation have been registered, the students' views show their positive attitudes towards this feature of the exam. Notwithstanding, one fact ought not to be overlooked. The examination of a modern foreign language on the basic level consists only of close-ended questions, which substantially reduces the risk of making mistakes while checking the test.

The next question is closely linked to the matter of fair assessment. The students were asked to present their opinion on the fact that the exam was going to be checked by the external examiners other than their school teachers. 27.7% of students were fairly satisfied with such a solution while 21.3% of them were rather happy with such a model of exam assessment. Almost 30% of participants remained impartial. 10.6% of students said that exams should rather be checked by their teacher, whereas only 4.3% of them shared this opinion strongly. It means that almost half of students (49%) think that external evaluation is a good idea and they do not fear external examiners. 14.9% of polled students would feel better if the examination papers stayed at school and were checked by their own teachers.

Those results may suggest that students are rather confident that their exams are checked by external examiners. The final two questions present the students who are not afraid of such a solution and, what is more, expect that their tests will be assessed fairly. It may be concluded that students found the external assessment a fair and just process. All in all, as far as just evaluation and external examiners are concerned, the research shows the positive signs of the washback effect.

In a further part of my research, the students were presented with a set of different types of exercises. A list containing 21 typical language tasks was constructed in a way that the proposed exercises were mutually exclusive and exhaustive (Babbie 2007). The tasks represented 5 different categories: 4 concerned with language skills (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) and one with knowledge of language.

The students were asked to point to those activities which were the most common during English lessons at school. More than one choice was allowed and there was no limit as to the chosen activities. Thus, the added percentages presented in some statistics would exceed 100%. Although the students also had the opportunity to add the tasks which were present on lessons but not listed among offered answers, they did not make use of it.

The possible answers were mixed and their order was random. Such a solution would avoid subconscious answers from students. To put it bluntly, the author sought not to influence the students' answers. This aspect of the research was fundamentally significant as it could prove or disprove if, during English lessons, examination type tasks are predominant or if the teachers followed the curriculum.

Given the extensive body of research results, relevant data will be selected for presentation. To begin with, table 2 presents the activities placed in order from the most to the least chosen by students. What strikes the author most is the fact that those activities which were chosen the most frequently by students are in fact the examination tasks.

Table 2. The activities placed in order from the most to the least often chosen by students.

	Frequencies	%		Frequencies	%
true or false reading comprehension questions	31	66 %	matching the text or the picture to the read text	16	34 %
true or false listening comprehension questions	28	59.6 %	grammar exercises: creating own sentences on the basis of rules	16	34 %
answering questions after listening	26	55.3 %	writing letters, wishes cards, postcards	16	34, %
matching the text or the picture to the listened text	23	48.9 %	short oral answers to the picture or the text	10	21.3 %
grammar exercises: substitution drills, repeating forms, sentence transformations	22	46.8 %	written picture, photo, people, situation description	9	19.1 %
choosing one correct answer after reading the text	22	46.8 %	summarising texts orally	8	17 %
looking for pointed information in the text	22	46.8 %	oral picture, photo, people, situation description	8	17 %
choosing one correct answer after listening	21	44.7 %	conversation in pairs about pointed subject	4	8.5 %
grammar exercises: matching the correct form to the gaps in the text	20	42.6 %	independent written answers after reading the text	2	4.3 %
grammar exercises: gap filling	19	40.4 %	short written answers to the picture or the text	2	4.3 %
grammar exercises: choosing one correct answer	18	38.3 %	In total	343	X

What is more, to achieve a more accurate perspective, the author compared with each other selected earlier categories. It turned out again that language skills which are tested in the examination are dominant ones during English lessons at school.

Table 3. Frequencies of categories.

Selected categories	Frequencies	%
Listening	98	28,5 %
Grammar (knowing the language means)	95	28 %
Reading	91	27 %
Speaking	30	8.5 %
Writing	29	8 %
In total	343	100 %

What may be slightly surprising is that speaking and writing skills are virtually on the same level, while speaking is not tested directly by the exam. Hence, to be able to put forward more credible conclusions the author presented each category with the tasks belonging to it separately.

Table 4. Frequencies of listening tasks.

Listening	Frequencies	%
true or false listening comprehension questions	28	28.5 %
answering questions after listening	26	26.5 %
matching the text or the picture to the listened text	23	23.5 %
choosing one correct answer after listening	21	21.5 %
In total	98	100 %

Table 5. Frequencies of grammar (knowing the language means) tasks.

Grammar (knowing the language means)	Frequencies	%
grammar exercises: substitution drills, repeating forms, sentence transformations	22	23 %
grammar exercises: matching the correct form to the gaps in the text	20	21 %
grammar exercises: gap filling	19	20 %
grammar exercises: choosing one correct answer	18	19 %
grammar exercises: creating own sentences on the basis of rules	16	17 %
In total	95	100 %

Table 6. Frequencies of reading tasks.

Reading	Frequencies	%
true or false reading comprehension questions	31	34 %
choosing one correct answer after reading the text	22	24 %
looking for pointed information in the text	22	24 %
matching the text or the picture to the read text	16	18 %
In total	91	100 %

Table 7. Frequencies of speaking tasks.

Speaking	Frequencies	%
short oral answers to the picture or the text	10	33.5 %
summarising texts orally	8	26.5 %
oral picture, photo, people, situation description	8	26.5 %
conversation in pairs about pointed subject	4	13.5 %
In total	30	100 %

Table 8. Frequencies of writing tasks.

Writing	Frequencies	%
writing letters, wishes cards, postcards	16	55 %
written picture, photo, people, situation description	9	31 %
independent written answers after reading the text	2	7 %
short written answers to the picture or the text	2	7 %
In total	29	100 %

The main conclusion must be repeated that if the activities are not tested by the exam, their presence is less frequent. This is especially visible as far as writing is concerned. The task which is part of the extended examination is practised more often than exercises which are not tested in the exam. When it comes to speaking, the task which is the most common (short oral responses about the picture or the text), despite being an oral exercise, can be useful in revising for the exam as well, as far as reading and listening are concerned. The only exceptions are the grammar exercises, some of which are not tested by the exam and, yet still they are common in the classroom. However, this proves only that if students practise tasks not included in the test, they are likely to concern grammar.

Such a teaching approach effectively reduces space for creativity and individuality, which is another example of a negative washback effect.

Finally, the author separated those tasks which may be associated with revising for the exam from those which are not part of the examination in English. To obtain more reliable results the author decided to remove those tasks which could obscure the understanding of the results. The author did not take into account the task belonging to the extended part of the exam (writing letters, wishes cards, postcards) and the tasks which can be interpreted as being both the examination and non-examination part. Eventually, the number of compared tasks was equal. All those efforts were made to obtain the maximum level of objectivity. The result is presented in table 9.

The results turned out to be far from expected. The disproportion between the exam type task and activities being not part of the exam is astounding. This comparison proves

Table 9. The difference in frequencies between examination and non-examination part.

Examination part	Frequencies	%	Non-examination part	Frequencies	%
grammar exercises: matching the correct form to the gaps in the text	20		grammar exercises: substitution drills, repeating forms, sentence transformations	22	
grammar exercises: gap filling	19		grammar exercises: creating own sentences on the basis of rules	16	
grammar exercises: choosing one correct answer	18		short oral answers to the picture or the text	10	
true or false reading comprehension questions	31		summarising texts orally	8	
choosing one correct answer after reading the text	22		oral picture, photo, people, situation description	8	
matching the text or the picture to the read text	16		conversation in pairs about pointed subject	4	
true or false listening comprehension questions	28		written picture, photo, people, situation description	9	
matching the text or the picture to the listened text	23		independent written answers after reading the text	2	
choosing one correct answer after listening	21		short written answers to the picture or the text	2	
In total	198/279	71%		81/279	29%

the presence of the negative aspect of the washback effect. What stems from the research results is that the teachers in class 3 of lower secondary school mostly prepare students for the exam. Any speaking outcome which is not present in the exam and is tested only in writing and indirectly appears to be neglected.

After demonstrating the results certain methodological conclusions must be taken into consideration. To begin with, the students chose all proposed answers. On the one hand, it shows that the types of exercises offered reflect the activities utilised at English lessons. On the other hand, since the students did not choose only certain answers, it should be explained more thoroughly. First, students come from different classes and their English teachers differ. Moreover, the students could not point to the most common activities but those which they remembered best. In addition, the students might not simply associate the proposed tasks with their English lesson activities and choose those answers which they liked best. Finally, these days students very often have additional lessons of English and they could choose those activities which were practised on their extra lessons.

But then again, students chose some answers more often than others. It can prove that those activities chosen more often are indeed more common in classroom situations. What is more, if some answers were chosen more frequently than the other ones, it shows a certain level of conformity with real life. Thus, the probability that the research results in fact reflect the classroom reality is significantly high. If so, the picture of the researched school emerging from results obtained can be interpreted as being more accurate and credible.

Finally, the students had the opportunity to tell what, in their opinion, was the main goal of English lessons at school. Table 10 presents their answers. As the students were asked to choose the answer which satisfied them most, more than one choice was allowed and that is why presented percentages exceed 100%.

Table 10. The main goals of an English lesson at school according to students.

The main goals of English lesson at school	Frequencies	%
Communicating with people in English	26	55.3 %
External standardised exam	20	42.6 %
Future job	17	36.2 %
Reading websites in English	6	12.8 %
Watching films in English	4	8.5 %
Reading books in English	2	4.3 %
In total	75	X

What may be a good symptom is that students are able to see those main goals of their English lessons at schools which are important in life outside the school. Being able to communicate with people in English or using English in future work are indeed profoundly relevant at the present time and it is a very positive sign that students perceive English school lessons in this way. However, what should not be forgotten is the fact that polled students were aged 15 and 16. At this age students are not entirely self-aware and they are beginning to think independently. And yet, a little more than two fifths of them could answer intentionally and be able to notice that the main purpose of an English lesson at school is revising for the exam. It is also an argument in favour of treating students as partners in a discussion about the educational system and taking their remarks into consideration. If interest was shown to them in the first place, it would be possible that some changes in learning and teaching process would be implemented. Therefore, the students' answers indicate another sign of negative washback, which is a lack of positive relationships between participants of the educational process.

The positive and negative washback effects on teachers

The choice of lesson activities made by students in the questionnaire was confirmed by the teachers. The teachers pointed out that the most common tasks during lessons were those which were part of the examination. Listening and reading comprehension complemented with grammar exercises were the dominant type of lesson activities in English lesson in class 3.

What is more, the teachers were aware of the fact that the exam did not test the speaking ability. T1 noticed that although the exam attempted to test communication abilities, providing the students with 3 answers of which one is correct, the exam did not encourage independent thinking. T2 and T3 add that the exam indeed evaluates listening, writing, and reading skills.

When enquired about the influence of the exam on the teaching process, T1 responded that the examination affects teaching and learning content, types of exercises practised, the choice of coursebook, and finally achieving good exam results. T3 noticed that the exam often stimulates students to work since the exam results influence students' future education and students attempt to score high at the exam. Those findings confirm students' opinions on the importance of the exam and its consequences for their future. Only T2 was able to see the washback of the examination. She thinks that students may

score high at the exam, but this does not ensure their high speaking performance in real-life communication. Such a belief is also confirmed by the students' answers showing that one of the main goals of English lessons at school is subjecting the acquired skills and knowledge to exam requirements and assessment.

All the teachers agreed with the importance of the exam in English both for students and teachers. The exam is significant for students since it motivates students to systematic work (T1), offers possibility to test language competences (T2), or makes students aware of their language skills (T3). T3 added that the exam offers the opportunity to compare the exam results between students within the same voivodeship and this helps to assess the level of school. Such a way of thinking indicates that the standardised examination is considered an important and reliable element of the educational system.

The exam is important for teachers since, as pointed by T1, the exam results reflect the students' knowledge. While T2 added that the exam motivates students to study and repetition, T3 showed that the exam provides teachers with a partial image of students' language skills learnt while studying at school for many years. What is more, the exam can help the teacher to pay more attention to those areas of language which might need to be improved. Finally, the exam offers the statistical representation of students' level at a foreign language.

The teachers, as far as chosen teaching materials are concerned, decided to use the coursebook which was designed for the purpose of the standardised examination in English. In addition, the teachers use also a revision coursebook containing exercises similar to the examination tasks. This is the obvious sign of a negative washback effect.

If the teachers had an opportunity to change something within the exam, T1 would propose the instructions which would help students understand the grammar tasks. T2 would make the exam easier and add more open-ended exercises. T3 concluded that a perfect exam does not exist.

The teachers were also asked if they remembered the difference in the teaching process between the school reality before and after introducing the exam. T3 admitted that he did not; however, he was less experienced than other interviewed teachers. T1 stated that there used to be more freedom in teaching. Now, all the content has to be associated with the examination and there is no time for developing speaking skills. T2 claimed openly that before the exam was introduced in the Polish educational system the teacher used to teach speaking. Now, because of the presence of the examination, teachers must solve tests with students. Despite generally negative opinions, none of the teachers would remove testing as an assessment method from the curriculum.

T1 and T2 believe that the lower secondary external standardised examination in English did change the school reality and influence the teaching process, proving an essential and key part of teachers' everyday practice. The examination forced certain alterations; for example, the teachers stopped teaching speaking skills. Now, the examination seems to determine the entire educational approach effectively and reduce teaching speaking at the cost of preparing for the examination itself. What is surprising is that the teachers appear to forget that the curriculum requirements are still broader than examination ones.

Analysing the teachers' responses one may notice the presence of some kind of influence being difficult to observe directly and identify unambiguously. It might be the pressure from the headteacher, parents, or from the whole educational system itself. Although it is difficult to identify the source of this influence, it is unquestionably true that this source does exist.

The teachers' opinions prove the existence of a washback effect in the researched school. The exam influences both the teaching and learning processes. The exam itself results in the presence of certain tendencies, choices, or strategies which would never appear if the examination was not introduced. Because of the exam the speaking skill is neglected and such an effect is openly against the curriculum which states clearly that the primary goal of education is effective communication.

What may be striking is that the teachers are more or less aware of the washback, especially its negative aspects, and yet such awareness does not result in a change of teaching strategies. Moreover, what might be astonishing to a certain extent is that the teachers seem to notice some positive aspects of the exam. They are not afraid of the examination, they regard it as an obvious part of the educational system, and they do not question the main idea of the examination. Finally, what is absolutely untypical, unexpected and yet intriguing is that the teachers perceive the examination as a tool which may provide them with the reliable feedback and thus become the objective assessment of their work. The strength of washback is so huge that the entire teaching process in the researched school seems to be entrenched.

The interviews with the teachers turned out not to be as abundant as students' questionnaires. Nonetheless, the data provided by the teachers confirmed the results obtained from students. It shows that applying a hybrid research methodology proved to be a legitimate decision. The data collected both from students and teachers constitutes mutually confirming, supporting, and complementing sources of information.

Conclusion

After having presented, described, and analysed obtained results, the present author must either accept or reject the hypotheses put forward at the beginning of the paper:

1. Lower secondary school external standardised examination in English does influence the process of teaching in the researched school.

The hypothesis must be supported. The presence of the examination resulted in changing the teaching strategies. The teachers are aware of the consequences of the exam and put more emphasis on preparing it than fulfilling the entire curriculum.

2. The lower secondary school external standardised examination in English does influence the process of learning in the researched school.

The hypothesis is proved to be correct. The collected data shows that English lessons at school are conducted in a certain way which was necessitated by the presence of the examination. Hence, students learn and practise mostly those language skills which are tested by the exam.

3. The washback effect of lower secondary school external standardised examination in English is both positive and negative in the researched school.

This hypothesis must be accepted. The author proved in the methodological part the presence of both positive and negative washback in the researched school. However, what should be emphasised is that there was more evidence of negative washback than positive.

4. The lower secondary school external standardised examination in English does influence the whole educational system in the researched school.

Since the influence on the whole educational system was impossible to assess, the answer to this hypothesis may be only partial, based on the conducted case study.

5. The washback of the lower secondary school external standardised examination in English is both intentional and unintentional in the researched school.

The hypothesis is true. First, the washback is intentional as teachers do prepare students to do the exams by practising more often those language skills which are tested in the exam. The teachers work in this way intentionally. Second, the washback is unintentional as well since the main goal of the exam was not to diminish the presence of speaking in school lessons. And yet the result was that this language skill is not practised because it is not part of the examination.

Concluding the presence of the washback effect, as far as the lower secondary school external standardised examination in English is concerned, some remarks should be made. Taking positive washback into account, the research was able to find the following conclusions:

1) Although the teachers seem to be indifferent to the issue of credible and fair results, the students are rather convinced that they are going to obtain such examination assessment. This is fundamentally positive washback.

2) The examination tasks are more artificial than authentic. They are prepared and designed for the exam, they do not constitute a reflection of authentic, real life situations and problems. The positive washback cannot be observed here.

3) Unfortunately, students do not obtain detailed report of their results. They are given only a percentage score with additional information as to what percentage of students achieved better and worse results. Such a solution definitely does not trigger a positive washback.

4) It was difficult to observe positive relationships between participants of this educational process. However, the study proves that students turned out to be perceptive observers of the educational process, and, which is rather unsatisfactory, their views and opinions appear not to be taken into consideration.

As far as negative washback is concerned, the following conclusions must be presented:

1) Most importantly, since the lower secondary school external standardised examination in English tests speaking both in writing and indirectly, an accusation may be made that the test is invalid itself and, therefore, as wrongly formed it should not be used as it will not cause positive washback.

2) Although researched teachers do not use only materials preparing for the test, most of these materials are devoted to preparation for the exam. They are revision coursebooks or/and coursebooks designed for exam revision. These materials pose the foundation for teachers and teaching process in a class 3 lower secondary school.

3) The assumption that teachers should not prepare students only for the test is very difficult to defend in the researched school. Collected data, both from students and teachers, prove clearly that the overall majority of activities during lessons are closely connected with preparation to the exam. The presence of negative washback is manifested by the number of activities which reflect the examination needs rather than entire curriculum requirements.

4) As it is significantly difficult to deal with the issue of creativity and individuality, especially when it comes to the problem of evaluation criteria, one may have the impression that teachers forget about creativity and individuality. There is no place for them in English lessons at school since the most dominant practice is exam preparation.

Although the obtained research results cannot be generalized about the entire population, they provide all interested researchers, pedagogists, teachers, linguists and all people concerned with interesting data showing the dangerous tendencies and negative consequences of the lower secondary school external standardised examination in English. In the author's opinion, the research itself poses a vital and essential part of the body of literature devoted to the washback effect and there may be the significant impulse to analyse, research and study the subject matter more willingly, thoroughly, and frequently.

This impulse seems to be more significant now than ever before. In conclusion, the present author would like to emphasise the visible trend in the Polish educational system. In 2015 the students of class 6 are going to take, for the first time in the history of Polish primary school, an external standardised examination in English. What can be the greatest threat is the fact that the presence of the external standardised examination on three educational levels may develop the general practice of teaching to help students score high at the test instead of simply teaching English. The main and final conclusion is that there is a high probability that Polish students, instead of being able to communicate in English, would be only prepared to solve tests.

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