

REVIEW

A Critical Review on Washback Effect in Education and Its Influence on Curriculum Design

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ABSTRACT

Testing and examination have an impact on teaching and learning pedagogy. The scholar used the term washback to explain the effect of testing on curriculum development. This review examines the concept of washback, influence that tests and examinations have on teaching, learning, and curriculum design. Washback can manifest in both positive and negative forms, impacting educational practices at both micro and macro levels. Positive washback encourages curriculum alignment and instructional improvements, fostering a more effective learning environment. However, negative washback can narrow the educational focus to test preparation, thereby limiting the broader learning objectives. The review also explores related concepts such as test impact, systemic validity, and curriculum alignment, highlighting the need for ongoing research to better understand the complexities of washback and to develop strategies for mitigating its negative effects. The findings underscore the importance of aligning testing with curriculum goals to ensure that assessments serve as a tool for enhancing, rather than constraining, educational outcomes.

Keywords: Washback; Curriculum Design; Education; Classroom Activities; Teaching and Learning Activities

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1. Introduction

Testing and examination has an impact on teaching and learning pedagogy. Alderson and Wall pointed out that ‘tests’ are considered powerful determiners of what happens in the classroom^[1]. The terms “washback” or “backwash” have been used in the academic field to describe the influence teaching and learning. In the research and literature on language testing, many definitions have been proposed for the term ‘washback’^[2].

Testing plays a key role in measuring how well teaching and learning are working. As a result, it impacts everyone involved, including teachers, students, test creators, curriculum designers, policymakers, institutions, and administrators^[3]. In other words, testing affects society as a whole. The outcomes of important tests are often used to drive positive changes in teaching and learning worldwide^[4].

Scholars and researchers have been debating and discussing the impact of tests on everyone involved, including the educational system and society as a whole^[5]. This concern has led to an increasing amount of research exploring the various ways teaching, learning, and testing are connected, both in expected and unexpected ways^[6]. “Washback” in general refers to the influence that tests have, whether directly or indirectly, on everyone involved in the educational process^[7]. In language education, studies on washback often focus on important exams, such as public tests, national English matriculation exams, high school graduation tests, university English exit exams, IELTS, and TOEFL^[8].

This review will first focus on the discussion of various definitions of washback or backwash. Next, it will explore the definitions of similar concepts by other researchers and the impact of washback on curriculum design. Lastly, the review will discuss previous studies on the washback effect and curriculum design.

2. Definition of Washback

The washback effect impacts different stakeholders in different ways^[9]. However, teachers and learners are considered the primary recipients of this influence. Teaching and learning often change as exams approach. Shohamy reported in her study that various changes occurred in classroom instruction as exams drew nearer^[10]. Teachers began reviewing the text instead of teaching new material. Text-

books were replaced with worksheets from the previous year. The classroom atmosphere became “test-like.” Additional class sessions were added to thoroughly review the material that had already been covered. Teachers encouraged students to master the exam material^[11].

The study also showed that learners’ strategies changed with the idea of the upcoming exams. Students have little motivation to study content that won’t appear on the exam paper. There is no time in their classes to explore questions that are unlikely to come up in the test^[4].

The term “washback” is widely discussed in language teaching and testing literature, though it is not commonly found in dictionaries. Some scholars use “washback,” while others opt for “backwash” to refer to the impact or influence of tests and examinations. In this article, we will look into the definition of (a) backwash and (b) washback^[12].

2.1. Backwash

The definition of “backwash” has been proposed by a few researchers in the literature. Spolsky said “The concept of backwash deals with the unforeseen side-effects of testing and not to the intended effects when the primary goal of the examination is the control of curricula.” Biggs viewed “backwash” as the fact that testing controls not only the curriculum but also teaching methods and students’ learning strategies^[13].

2.2. Washback

On the other hand, there are other schools of researchers that have used the term “washback”. Alderson and Wall stated that washback compels “teachers and students to do things they would not necessarily otherwise do because of the test”^[1]. Washback has given momentum to both the teacher and student in the context of going deeper into learning in order to pass the test^[14]. Messick has described washback as “the extent to which the introduction and the use of a test influences language and teachers to do things they would not otherwise do that promote or inhibit language learning”^[15]. Due to the test, teaching and learning is no longer just based on the intention to pick up knowledge and skills and enjoy the process. Bailey said that washback is the “influence of testing on teaching and learning”^[16]. Shohamy and other two researchers have em-

phasized that washback is delineated as “the connections between testing and learning”^[17].

Pearson has explained that washback working in a backward direction as the examination is always at the end of the learning process^[18]. The attitude, behaviour and motivation of parents, teachers and students are often influenced by this last step in the teaching and learning activities^[19]. The influence is from back to front. Washback indicates an intended or unintended (accidental) direction and function of curriculum change on aspects of teaching and learning by means of a change of public examinations^[20].

2.3. Washback Mechanism

In the article of Faten^[21], a trichotomy concept focusing on participants (e.g., students and teachers), the process (actions taken to improve learning), and the product (what is

learned) are discussed. The details of this trichotomy concept are presented in **Table 1** and **Figure 1**. Alderson and Wall proposed 15 hypotheses that explore how tests affect different aspects of teaching and learning^[1], such as depth, sequence, and motivation. Bailey’s model combines elements from both Hughes and Alderson and Wall^[16], emphasizing the interrelationships between test-takers, instructors, and researchers. These frameworks were further expanded by introducing five dimensions of washback: intentionality, specificity, value, intensity, and length. These dimensions explore the intended versus unintended effects of tests, the scope of their impact, the positivity or negativity of washback, the strength of washback based on exam stakes, and the duration of washback effects. Overall, these frameworks help to understand how exams influence teaching, learning, and educational outcomes, with effects that can be short-term or long-term^[21].

Table 1. Trichotomy washback model^[22].

Concept of Washback	Examples
Participants	People like students, teachers, material designers, and policy-makers whose attitudes might potentially be influenced by the examinations
Processes	The actions taken by the participants during the learning and teaching process concerning the examinations
Products	The actual output of teaching or the results of the examinations

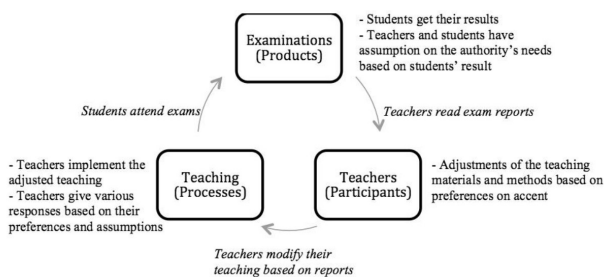


Figure 1. Washback cycle for teachers. (adopted from^[22]).

3. Washback and Related Concepts

Besides washback and backwash, researchers in the education field have also used other terms to describe the effect of testing and examination on teaching and learning pedagogy. These terms include “test impact”, “systemic validity”, “consequential validity”, “curriculum alignment” and “washback validity”^[23].

3.1. Test Impact

Some scholars have suggested that the influence of tests extends beyond the language classroom, affecting the broader educational landscape. The term “test impact” was first introduced by to describe the effects that tests have on individuals^[24], such as teachers and students, as well as on educational systems and society as a whole. In other words, the scholar viewed that tests and examinations do not just affect the attitude of the parties involved in short term courses and affecting the choice of classroom activities. But they have a long-term effect on the education system, changing the value system and eventually affecting human well-being. Wall shared a similar perspective, stating that “test impact” encompasses any effects a test might have on individuals, classroom policies or practices, schools, the education system, and society. McNamara also noted that tests can have effects beyond the classroom^[25], referring to this broader

influence on the community, including schools, as “test impact.” Similarly, Andrews used the term to describe the influence of tests on teaching and learning, the educational system^[26], and various stakeholders involved in education.

3.2. Systemic Validity

Systemic validity pertains to the instructional changes that occur within an educational system as a result of introducing a test. It highlights how tests can prompt curricular and instructional adjustments aimed at developing the cognitive skills that the test is intended to assess. Test has a direct impact on curriculum design. The curriculum is designed in such a way that the activities of teaching and learning activities fit the purpose of training the learning with sufficient knowledge and thinking skills to pass the examination^[27].

3.3. Consequential Validity

Consequential validity includes a range of factors, such as how tests are used, their impact on both test takers and teachers, how decision-makers interpret the results, and the potential for misuse or unintended consequences^[28]. Essentially, consequential validity highlights the various effects that tests can have, both inside and outside the classroom. It refers to the societal implications of testing, which represent just one aspect of the broader concept of test validity. Shohamy argued that the use of external tests to influence the educational process is often called the washback effect or measurement-driven instruction^[10, 29].

3.4. Curriculum Alignment

Shohamy and other two researchers defined curriculum alignment as “the change in curriculum based on the test results”^[17]. In simpler terms, curriculum alignment refers to how well the expectations outlined in the planned curriculum correspond with what teachers actually teach in the classroom and what students are assessed on in exams. It represents the connection between the intended curriculum, the curriculum that is taught, and the testing process^[30].

3.5. Washback Validity

Essentially, investigating washback validity requires testing researchers to observe how their tests influence class-

room activities^[31]. Washback validity focuses on how well a test serves the needs of students, educators, researchers, test administrators, and others who may use the test results. Furthermore, it also considers the significance of the connection between the test and the related instructional practices^[27].

3.6. Summary of Washback by Definition

Based on the definitions by various researchers, to summarize, washback can be categorized into two major perspectives: micro and narrower view that the effect is only on classroom activities and macro and wider view that the effect is beyond the classroom and affects the societal value system^[27].

Bachman and Palmer explained that washback at a macro level refers to how tests can affect society^[24], including government policies, school management, publishing, and parents’ expectations for their children. At a micro level, washback refers to how tests influence what happens in the classroom, such as changes in the curriculum, teaching methods, and how students learn. Bailey used the phrase “washback to the learners” to describe how tests affect students^[16], and “washback to the program” to describe how tests impact teachers, administrators, curriculum developers, and counselors.

In summary, the narrower definition of washback focuses on the impact that tests have on teaching and learning. The broader or more comprehensive view of washback (also known as test impact) goes beyond the classroom, considering the effects on the entire educational system and society as a whole^[32]. Overall, tests not only have a “significant impact” on individuals but also influence practices and policies within the classroom, the school, the educational system, and society as a whole^[33].

4. Types of Washback

The effect of washback can be generally categorized into two major types which are positive washback and negative washback. Positive washback carries a beneficial impact while negative washback casts a harmful impact on the educational system. The below session will discuss the effect on both micro and macro level^[34].

4.1. Positive Washback

4.1.1. Micro Level (Classroom Setting)

Teachers and students may be driven to achieve their educational objectives^[1]. Well-designed tests can serve as effective tools to promote a constructive teaching and learning experience^[18]. A thoughtfully crafted and innovative exam has the potential to lead to curriculum changes or the development of a new syllabus^[35].

4.1.2. Macro Level (Educational/Societal System)

Decision-makers leverage the authority of high-stakes testing to accomplish educational goals, including the implementation of new textbooks and curricula^[1, 10, 20]. Tests are also advocated as a means to foster the concept of lifelong learning and motivate individuals to study English^[27].

4.2. Negative Washback

4.2.1. Micro Level (Classroom Setting)

Exams will lead to the narrowing of curriculum content. What students learn is merely test-oriented language rather than a comprehensive understanding^[10]. The topics that are not directly related to the examination are often time neglected and not emphasized by teachers, thereby causing examinations to negatively alter the curriculum^[36]. Moreover, examinations may fail to establish a proper connection with learning principles or course objectives^[20]. On top of that, examinations have also posed high level of stress, fear, pressure and anxiety on teachers have described feeling high levels of anxiety, fear, and pressure because they believe their job performance is evaluated based on students' test scores^[17]. Educators have experienced negative reactions to

the stress caused by the public display of classroom scores. Inexperienced teachers feel a greater degree of anxiety and pressure for accountability compared to more experienced teachers^[37]. "Testing programs significantly reduce the time available for instruction, narrow the scope of curriculum content and teaching methods, and may diminish teachers' ability to teach content and use methods and materials that are incompatible with standardized test formats"^[35]. An increasing number of paid coaching classes are being established to help students prepare for exams, but what students learn are test-taking skills rather than language learning activities^[38]. Measurement-driven instruction will inevitably lead to rote memorization, narrowing of curriculum content, focusing on skills most relevant to testing, restricting the creativity and spontaneity of teachers and students, and undermining the professional judgment of educators^[39].

4.2.2. Macro Level (Educational/Societal System)

Policy-makers frequently utilize exams to push their political objectives and assert influence over educational systems^[17]. Tests are employed as tools to initiate change. In a broader educational context, positive washback enables authorities to leverage exams to meet educational objectives^[40]. However, negative washback can emerge when these goals are used to exert control over the academic system, creating undue pressure and stress for school staff, teachers, and students alike. Thus, in the realm of education, washback can have both positive and negative aspects, depending on the perspective of those involved^[41].

The summary of positive and negative washback with examples is presented in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Summary of positive and negative washback with examples^[22].

Level	Component	Positive Washback	Negative Washback
Micro level	Students	are motivated to work harder	learn only knowledge that is tested; have a negative attitude towards learning; learning motivation is lowered
	Teachers	cover the subject more thoroughly and complete the syllabus within a time limit	narrow the curriculum and only cover those tested subjects
	Others	teaching-learning process is encouraged	Anxiety is created for both learners and teachers
Macro level	Education System	The authority will review and introduce new textbooks and curricula to achieve the goals of teaching and learning which fit the expectations from society	The authority uses tests to promote political agendas and seizes control over the educational system

5. Pedagogical Implications

By looking at the possible positive and negative effects that examinations can have on both micro (classroom) and macro (education system) levels, it seems that teachers play an important role in creating these effects^[42]. In other words, what teachers believe is a key factor in determining these effects. For example, some teachers may think it's important to carefully plan their lessons to meet examination requirements, while others may feel that examinations force them to teach things that aren't right for their students^[43]. It depends on how teachers interpret and see examinations. Teachers have a big role in deciding what kind of effects the examinations will have and how strong these effects will be. So, teachers can help create positive effects. It's not the examination itself that changes what teachers do, but what teachers believe about those changes. Teachers should get ongoing training and learn different teaching methods^[27].

Sometimes, schools or school leaders use exams as a tool to bring in new courses, but this might only change the way teachers teach, not make big changes in teaching methods. As Wall said^[33], "Exams can't make teachers change what they do if teachers don't believe in the new ideas or don't have the skills to try, evaluate, and adjust to new methods." This means that teachers need to make these changes themselves, and they need the right skills to do so. Again, teachers play a very important role in either creating positive effects or stopping negative ones^[44].

Teacher Assessment Literacy (TAL) is a concept introduced by some scholars^[45], highlighting that teachers often lack a deep understanding of assessment principles, which can negatively affect student learning. When teachers are equipped with proper knowledge of testing, they can help reduce the negative washback effects on both teaching and learning. Inbar-Lourie also emphasized that traditional assessment training for teachers has contributed to these negative impacts^[46]. By involving teachers in high-stakes testing alongside their teaching duties, their anxiety about poor student exam performance can be alleviated. Researchers have suggested that providing exam-specific training for teachers can enhance communication between testers and educators. Likewise, testers should also receive training tailored to specific courses^[47].

Parental involvement in the assessment process has been shown to have a positive effect. In the study by Cheng

and two researchers^[48], parents' views on their children's exams were included. The study involved two surveys—one focusing on students and the other on parents—which revealed a strong alignment in their perspectives on school assessments.

To summarize, teachers should remember two key points. The teachers making the examinations should try to match what is tested with what is taught, using more direct tests, and making sure students know what will be on the test. Examinations can lead teachers to "teach to the test," which might mean students only learn bits and pieces of the language, not the communication skills they need in real life. To fix this, it's better to use real and direct tests^[16]. Teachers are responsible for helping students to pass the examination. Teachers should learn more teaching methods by taking training courses, observing other teachers, and using exams to improve student learning without causing them to lose motivation by cramming too much^[49]. As teachers may have limited power to influence big national and international examinations, but they do have a lot of power to guide students in learning, teaching them language, and helping them handle examinations and their results". All in all, it's the teacher who has the most power to turn examinations into either positive or negative effects^[50].

6. Previous Studies on the Washback Effect and Curriculum Design

In this part of the review, few case studies in the literature investigating the washback effect and curriculum design are discussed.

6.1. Investigating the Relationship Between Washback and Curriculum Alignment

Sultana delved into the relationship between two important educational concepts: washback and curriculum alignment^[30]. In the article, the author mentioned that washback refers to the influence that tests have on teaching and learning, often shaping what and how teachers teach and how students learn. Curriculum alignment, on the other hand, is defined as the extent to which curriculum standards, teaching, and assessments are in agreement, ensuring that what is taught in the classroom aligns with what is tested.

The author noted that while both washback and curricu-

lum alignment had been extensively researched individually, their interconnectedness had not been thoroughly explored. Through a scoping review methodology, Sultana synthesized existing studies on these two concepts, with a particular focus on how curriculum alignment can influence washback. The review revealed that misalignment between curriculum and testing often resulted in negative washback, where teaching became narrowly focused on preparing students for tests rather than fostering a broader understanding of the subject matter. This phenomenon is particularly prevalent in high-stakes testing environments, where the pressure to perform well on exams can lead teachers to prioritize test content over the curriculum's broader educational goals.

Sultana argued that by ensuring better alignment between curriculum and testing, negative washback can be mitigated. When tests are designed to reflect the objectives of the curriculum, teaching can align more closely with these objectives, leading to improved educational outcomes. The article suggests that curriculum alignment studies can provide valuable insights for washback research, particularly in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of tests and educational programs. Sultana highlighted that alignment studies could help uncover the complexities of washback, offering a new perspective on how tests influence classroom instruction.

The article also explores how the concept of alignment has been used in different educational contexts, citing examples where misalignment led to undesirable educational outcomes. For instance, in some cases, the narrow focus on test content led to a phenomenon known as "teaching to the test," where broader learning objectives were sidelined in favor of preparing students for specific exam questions. Sultana emphasizes that a more integrated approach to studying washback and curriculum alignment could lead to better educational practices, as alignment helps ensure that tests serve their intended purpose of enhancing teaching and learning rather than distorting it.

6.2. A Review of the Washback of English Language Tests on Classroom Teaching

Qi has compiled a review on negative and positive washback on course content, teaching material and teaching activities.

6.2.1. Washback on Course Content

The author has summarized a few studies about negative washback and follow. Barnes found that in Vietnam^[51], teachers' reliance on TOEFL iBT textbooks led to a focus on teaching only the language skills tested in the exam, which prioritized test preparation over actual language acquisition. Similarly, Kılıçkaya observed that in Turkey^[52], secondary school teachers concentrated on grammar, vocabulary, and reading to help students perform well in the TEOG exam, often neglecting other important skills like speaking and listening. Furaidah and two researchers noted a similar pattern in Indonesia^[53], where schools focused on test-related content, particularly listening and reading, at the expense of speaking and writing skills. These studies suggest that such exams can limit the range of language skills taught in classrooms, as teachers prioritize exam content over a more comprehensive language education.

Besides, there were also studies discussing positive washback. Wang and two researchers studied the washback of the internet-based College English Test Band 4 (IB CET-4) in China^[54], which replaced the old CET-4 to better meet the demands of modern IT literacy. The new IB CET-4 integrated listening, speaking, and writing skills, shifting the focus from vocabulary and grammar to communication skills in nearly authentic language contexts. As a result, teachers adjusted their instruction to emphasize these communicative skills. Similarly, Cheng found that the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE) could also bring positive washback^[55], as teachers adapted their course content to help students succeed in exams, which in turn benefited their future careers. These studies suggest that well-designed tests can encourage the integration of communicative language teaching content, preparing students for real-world English use.

6.2.2. Washback on Teaching Material

Hamp-Lyons analyzed TOEFL textbooks and found that they were focused on test content rather than practical language use^[56], leading to confusion among teachers and students due to decontextualized concepts. This made it difficult for even experienced teachers to plan effective courses, resulting in a focus on reproducing textbook content rather than fostering language skills. Additionally, the lack of a credible syllabus for TOEFL courses forced teachers

to base their materials on frequently tested items. Cheng also observed significant washback in Hong Kong^[55], where secondary schools adopted textbooks specifically designed for passing the HKCEE, although some teachers struggled with the objectives. In Turkey, Kılıçkaya noted that teachers were required to use inadequate^[52], ministry-selected textbooks for the foreign language section of the TEOG exam, forcing many to seek additional materials. Overall, these studies highlight how test-focused teaching materials can limit effective language instruction.

Saif found that in a U.S. teaching assistant training program^[57], the teacher used and revised materials to focus on the speaking skills tested in a speaking test, specifically addressing areas where students needed improvement based on their test performance. Similarly, Wang and two researchers noted in their study on the IB CET-4 in China that teachers adopted new materials^[54], such as aural recordings and video clips, to create a more authentic language learning context. These examples demonstrate how well-designed tests can lead to the adoption of effective teaching materials that enhance language instruction.

6.2.3. Washback on Teaching Activities

Saif observed that in a U.S. teaching assistant training program^[57], a speaking test influenced the teacher to use group discussions, which provided students with ample opportunities for presentation and feedback. This approach aligned with the teacher's preference for a seminar-style teaching, showing positive washback. Similarly, Wang and two researchers found that teachers in China^[54], influenced by the IB CET-4 test, adopted more student-centered instructional methods and internet-based teaching environments to encourage self-learning. Turner noted that teachers in Quebec incorporated group discussions from the exam's speaking section into their classroom activities^[58], enhancing student engagement. However, Shohamy and other two researchers found that while student-centered activities were common^[17], some teachers still limited their focus to exam-related skills, particularly for students about to take the test. Overall, the studies suggest that when tests promote communicative skills, they can lead to positive, student-centered teaching activities, though some limitations may persist.

Alderson and Hamp-Lyons (1996) observed that TOEFL teachers often used monotonous teaching patterns, limiting student interaction and engagement. Similarly,

Barnes found that TOEFL iBT courses in Vietnam were dominated by teacher instruction^[51], driven by a reliance on test-focused textbooks, which suppressed student participation. Kılıçkaya also noted that in Turkey, teachers relied on direct instruction, with students only actively participating in limited test-related tasks^[52]. These studies suggest that when teaching is teacher-centered, it often results in negative washback, as it restricts student involvement and focuses solely on test preparation.

6.3. Washback Effect on School-Based Assessment on Malaysian Secondary School Students' English Language Learning

Mohd Salleh et al. examine the washback effects of School-Based Assessment (SBA) on Malaysian secondary school students' English language learning, focusing on Form 4 students. Washback refers to the influence of assessment on teaching and learning, which can be either positive or negative^[59]. The study, conducted through questionnaires, interviews, and classroom observations, found that students generally had positive perceptions of SBA. They appreciated the engaging activities and constructive feedback provided by their teachers, which they felt helped improve their language skills, especially in writing and speaking. However, the study also identified significant challenges, particularly the lack of sufficient resources and time for effective SBA implementation. Teachers were reported to be knowledgeable and skilled, but they struggled with outdated materials and inadequate technological resources, especially in residential schools. Additionally, while student-centered activities were common, follow-up activities were less frequent due to time constraints. The findings highlight the need for better resources and support to ensure SBA's effectiveness and alignment with educational goals in Malaysia^[60]. Despite these challenges, the study suggests that SBA has potential benefits if implemented with proper resources and teacher support. The article concludes by emphasizing the importance of ongoing research to refine SBA practices and ensure they contribute positively to students' learning experiences.

6.4. Research Gaps and Future Studies

To address the gaps in the current literature on washback and to guide future research, several promising direc-

tions can be proposed. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into the dynamic nature of washback effects over time, revealing how these influences evolve as curricula, assessments, and teaching practices change. Cross-cultural comparisons could uncover variations in washback phenomena across different educational systems and cultural contexts, highlighting unique challenges and opportunities. Additionally, the development and validation of innovative assessment tools tailored to specific educational goals could help mitigate negative washback and enhance positive outcomes. These tools could align assessments more closely with learning objectives, fostering broader educational improvements. Overall, such studies would not only advance theoretical understanding but also offer practical strategies for educators and policymakers to optimize the role of assessments in education.

7. Conclusion

This review has discussed the concept of washback in detail and highlighted the significant impact that testing and examinations have on both teaching and learning processes. Washback can be categorized into both positive and negative forms, influencing classroom activities, curriculum design, and even broader educational policies. Positive washback can drive educational improvements, aligning teaching methods with curriculum goals, while negative washback can limit learning to test-focused content, thereby narrowing the educational experience. To mitigate negative washback, it is essential to ensure better alignment between testing and curriculum objectives, fostering a more holistic and effective educational environment.

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