

Understanding Washback in the Classrooms: The Conflicts of the Syllabus and the Examination

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Abstract

In many contexts where English language teaching is based on a prescribed syllabus, one of the main issues discussed is whether teachers are teaching students according to the specifications of the syllabus or are they preparing them to excel in the examination. Discussions in the literature suggest that very often, teachers focus more on examination skills than broader syllabus specifications in their teaching, creating test washback effects. This paper argues that when there are differences in the constructs of the syllabus document and the examination, teachers make a conscious decision to follow the construct of the examination. This washback effect is facilitated in some ways by teachers' beliefs and pedagogic skills. This study explores the issues in two stages. First a document analysis of the Malaysian ESL syllabus document and the high stakes Malaysian Education Certificate English examination papers was undertaken to identify the similarities in and differences between the two documents. In the second stage, semi-structured interviews with two teachers were analysed to understand the cognitions and decision-making of teachers working with the syllabus and examination. The results of this study show that the Malaysian ESL syllabus document and the examination papers do not share similar constructs. While the specifications of the syllabus document are very communicative in nature, the examination focuses more on testing students' language accuracy. The interviews reveal the teachers' tendency to follow the construct of the examination which was more congruent with their beliefs, skills and competencies.

Keywords: English language teaching, communicative language teaching, washback

1. Introduction

In many contexts where English is taught based on a prescribed syllabus, one of the main issues discussed is whether teachers are teaching students according to the specifications of the syllabus or are they preparing their students to excel in the examination (Andrews, 2004). For example, in the classrooms where English is taught communicatively, students' inability to use the language for various communicative purposes is a matter of an important concern (Ainon Jariah et al., 2013; Naginder, 2013; Normazidah et al., 2012). It is often claimed that many students do not possess skills to use English even after learning the language for many years in school. One of the contributing factors to this phenomenon is the fact that English is actually learned as a subject "... focusing on the mechanics of the language without making connections to how it is used in real communicative events" (Normazidah et al., 2013: p.39). In other words, the teaching and learning of English in the classrooms do not prepare students to be communicatively competent. Instead, according to Kok and Miller (2007), English language teaching in some contexts focuses on preparing students for examinations. This suggests the existence of washback, which is defined by Rea-Dickins and Scott (2007) as the effects of examination constructs on teaching and learning practices. It is argued that in the classrooms, teachers may focus more on ensuring students' ability to answer examination questions rather than focusing on achieving the objectives specified in the syllabus document (Rea-Dickins and Scott, 2007; Alderson & Banerji, 2001). Previous research studies on washback effects tend to focus on teacher's teaching (Sukyadi & Mardian, 2011; Azadi & Gholami, 2013) as well as students' learning (Pan & Newfields, 2012).

These studies describe how teachers' and students' teaching and learning practices in classrooms are influenced by the construct of the examinations. This research study investigates beyond these two issues, and explores the reasons that may cause washback effects in the classroom. We argue that washback exists because teachers make conscious decisions to build students' examination skills rather than to focus on the objectives of the syllabus document. These decisions are based on their beliefs and their pedagogic skills. The conscious decisions are the results of the differences in the constructs of the two framing documents for teaching and learning – the syllabus and the examinations. According to Borg (2003),

... teachers are active, thinking decision-makers who make instructional choices by drawing on complex, practically-oriented, personalized and context-sensitive networks of knowledge, thoughts and beliefs (p.81).

The above quote suggests that teacher's actions in the classrooms are the result of various factors that surround their teaching environment. Their choices of actions are often influenced by their beliefs about what would yield acceptable results. In the context of this research study, the conflict between the specifications of the syllabus

document and the examination format has motivated the teachers to focus on the examination, suggesting that where this has high stakes for the students, it also has high stakes for the teachers.

Based on the premise that teachers would make instructional decisions based on the options they have, the research questions that this study intends to answer are;

RQ1: In what ways are the specifications of the syllabus and the construct of the examination similar and different?

RQ2: How do the similarities or differences of the syllabus specifications and the examination format influence teachers' instructional focus in the ESL classrooms?

Even though this research study focuses on Malaysian context, the findings may be extended to other English language teaching contexts with similar issues on washback effects.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Nature of a Syllabus

According to Nunan (1988), "... a syllabus is a statement of content which is used as a basis for planning courses of various kinds ..." (p.6). White (1988) states that, traditionally, a syllabus can be seen "... as an organized statement of content of things to be learnt" (p.91). In addition, Johnson (1989) claims that, "The language syllabus is typically defined as a selection and organization of linguistic content to be taught" (p.28). A syllabus is defined by Richards (2001) as "... a specification of the content of a course of instruction and lists of what will be taught and tested" (p.2). All of these definitions indicate that one important element that constitutes a syllabus is the specification of content that needs to be taught in classrooms. In other words, a language syllabus may provide a list of linguistic items that students need to learn to master a language and this may be constrained by different views of language and language learning.

Brumfit (1984) states that a syllabus,

"... is a document which is intended to translate our understanding of how language is learnt into practical action, so it must have a specifiable relationship with what we know of the nature of language, language acquisition, second language learning and language use" (p.77).

The above statement suggests that specifications on teaching and learning in a syllabus document should reflect the different theories of language and language learning adopted by a particular educational context. For example, in a communicative language teaching and learning context, the content of the syllabus should focus on developing students' communicative ability and the interactions in the classrooms should support this.

A more elaborated notion of a syllabus is provided by Breen (2001) who highlights that a syllabus should provide:

- a) A clear framework of knowledge and capabilities selected to be appropriate to overall aims;
- b) Continuity and a sense of direction in classroom work for teachers and students;
- c) A record for other teachers of what has been covered in the course;
- d) A basis for evaluating students' progress;
- e) A basis for evaluating the appropriateness of the course in relation to overall aims and student needs identified both before and during the course;
- f) Content appropriate to the broader language curriculum, the particular class of learners, and the educational situation and wider society in which the course is located.

(Breen, p.151).

Breen's (2001) list indicates that a syllabus might also be used for evaluation purposes (as stated in 'd' and 'e'). These suggest that students' evaluation or assessment should be based on the framework of the syllabus. As such, in a communicative language teaching classroom, issues such as a focus on the knowledge and skills required for examination success should not be a hindrance to students' success as the questions in the examinations are supposed to measure their progress based on the content of syllabus. However, a syllabus document exists in a space constructed by different documents and artifacts, such as the instructional materials and examination formats. These documents can be in conflict rather than aligning neatly in a way the teachers can implement. In this case, teachers would have to make conscious decisions, relying on their beliefs, knowledge and pedagogic skills on what needs to be implemented in the classrooms. When the decisions tend to lean more towards the construct of the examination rather than the syllabus specifications, washback occurs, and the nature of the syllabus enacted in the classroom can change.

Two most common language syllabus types used in teaching and learning are Breen's (1987) formal and functional syllabi.

Breen's (1987) notion of the formal syllabus emphasises the knowledge of the forms of language more than the knowledge and skills of how meanings are conveyed and how language is used in social contexts. In other words, the focus in classrooms is to harness students' ability to produce accurate forms of language. As such, the syllabus specifically identifies pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, morphology and structural features of discourse to be taught to students. Students are assessed based on their ability to produce accurate production of different language forms through speaking and writing. Breen's (1987) formal syllabus clearly depicts the view

that language is 'structural' as identified by Richards and Rodgers (2001).

Unlike the formal syllabus, Breen's (1987) functional syllabus views language as a means to achieve certain purposes, thus, the main focus in classrooms is on the functions of language. Therefore, knowledge of how meanings are conveyed and how language can be used appropriately in social contexts are more important than the knowledge of the forms of language. However, this does not mean that knowledge about forms is not emphasized because learners are expected to demonstrate their abilities to produce accurate language along with socially appropriate language through reading, writing, speaking and listening. This is reflective of Richards and Rodgers's (2001) 'functional' view of language.

The two syllabi discussed above focus on two different skills. While the formal syllabus stresses on developing language accuracy, the functional syllabus emphasizes the importance of fluency. Other documents such as the examination format should be in alignment with these syllabi to minimise the conflict of implementation for the teachers. In the context of the Malaysian ESL syllabus document for example, if a misalignment exists – the syllabus focuses on 'functions' and the examination focuses on 'forms' – teachers in the classrooms need to make a choice between the two foci. The decisions to focus on 'forms' within the context of a functional syllabus may result in negative washback effects.

2.2. Washback Effects

Alderson and Wall (1993) define washback as "the way that tests are ... perceived to influence classroom practices, and syllabus and curriculum planning" (p.117). Based on this definition, we argue that washback is a condition in teaching and learning when an examination and its construct become the determinant of what takes place in the classrooms. However, this practice should not pose any problems if the constructs of the examination are similar to the specifications of the syllabus document. For example, if the syllabus document supports communicative language teaching, the examination should be utilized to assess students' communicative ability. As such, when the teachers focus on language use and functional skills, then classroom teaching will harness students' communicative ability. We believe that washback becomes a hindrance to students' communicative language development when the questions in the examination papers do not focus on testing students' capability to use the language for communicative purposes.

According to Pan (2009), washback may bring positive as well as negative effects. She posits that the effects are positive when washback encourages the teachers to follow the specifications of a syllabus, and this focus is perceived by teachers and students to lead to success in the examination. Negative effects of washback on the other hand, will be present when teaching in the classrooms is limited to only the items tested in the examination and the specifications of a syllabus may be ignored. Based on Pan's (2009) claim, we believe that positive effects of washback happen when the syllabus document and the examination focus on the same constructs. Since discussion on washback in some research studies have been negative so far (Azadi & Gholami, 2013; Normazidah et al., 2013; Kok & Miller, 2007) it is important to study the alignments and misalignments of the syllabus and the examination format to determine some possible reasons for the existence of negative washback effects.

In their study on the effects of an EFL test on the teaching and learning of English in Iran, Azadi and Gholami (2013) discovered that in the classrooms, teachers had the tendency to follow the constructs and formats of the EFL test – thus the existence of washback.

Sukyadi and Mardiani (2011) conducted a research to study the washback effects of the national English language examination on the teaching and learning of English in Indonesian secondary schools. Similar to Azadi and Gholami (2013), they found evidence of negative washback effects in the classrooms. According to them, teachers focused their attention on teaching language items related to the test and developing students' test-taking strategies. These two studies indicate that negative washback effects tend to happen in the context where students have to sit for major examinations at the end of their schooling years. The high stakes nature of these tests for both students and teachers serve as motivations for these washback effects. However, these studies do not identify the teacher cognition mechanisms which generate these washback effects in these assessment contexts.

3. Methodology

This study involves an analysis of 1) the Malaysian ESL Syllabus document and 2) the sample papers of the Malaysian Certificate Education Examination (SPM) English Language Papers 1 and 2. The analysis involves identification of similar and dissimilar features of the objectives and content of the syllabus with the questions in the sample papers of the English Language Papers 1 and 2. According to Payne and Payne (2004), analysis of documents can be used to categorise, investigate, interpret and identify written documents whether in the private or public domain. The documentary analysis commenced with the evaluation of the learning objectives and the language content stated in the Malaysian ESL syllabus document. These were compared to the syllabus constructs proposed by Widdowson (1978), Breen (2001) and Richards and Rodgers (2001). The comparison enabled us to determine the focus of the teaching and learning of English in Malaysian ESL classrooms. The documentary analysis then continued with the evaluation of the questions in English Language Papers 1 and 2. The questions

were compared to the learning objectives stated in the Malaysian ESL syllabus document as well as the syllabus constructs proposed by Widdowson (1978), Breen (2001) and Richards and Rodgers (2001). The comparison enabled us to determine the similarities and/or differences between the construct of the syllabus document and the English Language Papers 1 and 2.

Then, semi-structured interviews with two Malaysian English language teachers were conducted. While the documentary analysis was to determine the similarities or differences of the constructs of the syllabus document and the examination papers, the interviews focused on the ways teachers' practices in the Malaysian ESL classrooms interpreted and negotiated these features. Interviews used in a research "... to obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena" (Kvale, 1996:6). Hence, the interviews enabled the teachers to articulate their points of view on the teaching and learning of English in relation to the specifications of the syllabus documents and the construct of the examination ('the described phenomena') within the context of the Malaysian ESL programme ('the life world of the interviewee'). The two teachers interviewed were experienced English language teachers who were well versed with the specifications of the syllabus document and the format of the examinations. The interviews focused on three main issues:

1. The teachers' understanding of the focus of the teaching and learning of English in Malaysia;
2. Teachers' awareness of the similarities and differences between the construct of the syllabus document and the examination; and
3. Teachers' practices in the classrooms.

4. Results and Analysis

The documentary analysis is divided into two different sections:

- 4.1. The Malaysian Secondary School English Language syllabus; and
- 4.2. The Malaysian Certificate Education Examination English Language Paper

4.1. *The Malaysian Secondary School English Language Syllabus*

The Malaysian Secondary School English language syllabus specifies that the objectives of learning English are to enable learners to:

- i. form and maintain relationships through conversation and correspondence; take part in social interactions; and obtain goods and services;
- ii. obtain, process and use information from various audio-visual and print sources; and present the information in spoken and written form;
- iii. listen to, view, read and respond to different texts and express ideas, opinions, thoughts and feelings imaginatively and creatively in spoken and written form; and
- iv. show an awareness and appreciation of moral values and love towards the nation.

(Curriculum Specifications, 2003, p.1)

The above objectives suggest that the English language lessons in Malaysia focus on developing the four main language skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking. These objectives also indicate that the focus in classrooms is to enable students to use the English language for a wide range of communicative purposes. These purpose range from management of micro-interactions using specific language skills (ii and iii above), to broader, more social macro-impacts of language use (i and iv above).

The objectives of the Malaysian Secondary School English Language syllabus imply that the focus in the classrooms is on 'use' rather than 'usage' of language (Widdowson, 1978). 'Use' is defined as the emphasis on getting students to use language appropriately and effectively for different social interactions (Widdowson, 1978). The stress on 'use' is in tandem with Richards and Rodgers's functional view of language (2001). 'Usage' on the other hand, is defined as the emphasis on getting students to produce correct forms of language, in terms of rule-based accuracy (Widdowson, 1978), which corresponds with the structural view of language proposed by Richards and Rodgers (2001). In the context of classroom activities, focusing on 'use' results in students discussing matters meaningful to them, such as hobbies and interests. In this kind of activity, teachers emphasise students' ability to exchange information regarding the topic with all participants involved. Grammatical accuracy would be achieved not through practice based on rules, but through negotiation of specific meaning. In contrast, if students are engaged in 'usage' focused activities, the priority would be on producing sentences with accurate application of grammatical rules, but little regard to successful communication.

In implementing these syllabus objectives, teachers in Malaysian English language classes should design activities which can help students to achieve the purposes of learning English for communication. However, there are further specifications, which identify the actual language items students need to learn. This section of the document is labeled as 'Language Content' section and is divided into four main sections – 'grammar', 'suggested sentence patterns', 'sound system' and 'word list'. The presence of prescribed language content to be taught to students conforms to Breen's (2001) notion of syllabus as a document that provides "... a clear framework of

knowledge and capabilities selected to be appropriate to overall aims” as well as “Continuity and a sense of direction in classroom work for teachers and students” (151). The language content section of the Malaysian ESL syllabus document comes in the forms of a list of language items that students need to master.

The items listed under the ‘Language Content’ section of the syllabus such as vocabulary, sound system and suggested sentence patterns do not come with specific guidance on how teachers should implement them in the classroom. For example, the vocabulary comes in the form of a random word list without any apparent pattern. The grammatical items listed come with a simple instruction which says, “Teachers are encouraged to teach these grammatical items in the context of topics” (Curriculum Specifications, 2003: 22). This instruction indicates that students should be exposed to the contextualized use of language which is in line with the communicative nature of the objectives specified. It may be assumed that in the classroom, teachers engage students in activities which enable them to learn specific language forms while participating in function-focused activities (for example, learning to use the present tense accurately when talking about their daily activities at home). The syllabus guidance further states, “If extra practice is required for better understanding or retention, items can be taught in isolation” (Curriculum Specification, 2003:22). As such, grammatical items can be the focus of teaching if negotiation of meaning is not enough. During the interviews, both teachers revealed the tendency to follow the syllabus specifications by integrating grammar items with reading or writing activities. One of the teachers stated,

My usual practice in the class is to give them a reading or writing task and with this task I introduce one or two grammar items. So, for example [if] they have to write a letter and they need to use, modals [such as] *would ... ought to*, [I would] integrate. Grammar can be quite difficult for students especially the weaker ones. So if I teach grammar, only grammar, I mean, they can get bored. If they have to write a letter as well, then the focus is not only on grammar because they also have to finish the letter. With, good students – I have a group of very good students, speak good English, write well – so with them I do teach grammar because with them who are fluent, who read a lot of English, my focus is to make sure their grammar is correct. So we do grammar practice [with] no integration, not all the time but I do that with good students. This matters, you know, grammar. It is good if their grammar is good, then surely they would do well [in English].

The description of teaching practice here reveals how the teacher made a conscious decision to integrate grammar with the teaching of reading and writing skills, but the effect was a focus on the grammar point, and the skills work becoming secondary. For the weaker students, integration of grammar was perceived as more demanding, so the focus was on the isolated rules. For the stronger students, communicative activities were easy to implement, but there was a perceived risk that grammatical accuracy may be lost unless the rules were focused on. When asked if her decision to integrate grammar with the two skills was influenced by the specifications of the syllabus document, she claimed,

No, even if the syllabus suggests differently, I still do what I do because I think that’s the best for my students. For example, the syllabus does not say *treat good students differently*, I should teach them differently from my students who are weak, but I still do.

The above comments indicate that the teachers did not always adhere in a precise way to the syllabus document. They interpreted the specification, guided by their personal and professional beliefs as teachers about effective practice in the classroom. The position represented by this teacher aligns with contemporary understanding of how teachers teach: their practice is in part informed by their beliefs, and in part by the set curriculum. The syllabus described above is part of this curriculum, and the next section, the high stakes test, the Malaysian Certificate Education Examination, taken by students explores another important aspect of the curriculum.

4.2. The Malaysian Certificate Education Examination English Language Paper

The Malaysian Certificate Education Examination English Language Paper is divided into two: English Paper 1 and English Paper 2. The following table summarizes the content of the examination paper.

Table 1: The Malaysian Certificate Education Examination English Language Paper

PAPER	FOCUS
English Paper 1	
Section A (35 marks) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Directed writing 	Usage
Section B (50 marks) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continuous writing 	Usage
English Paper 2	FOCUS
Section A (15 marks) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 15 multiple choice questions 	Usage
Section B (10 marks) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Completing graphic organizer 	Usage
Section C (25 marks) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Five reading comprehension questions (10 marks) Writing 130-word summary (15 marks) 	Use
Section D (20 marks) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Open ended questions based on poems/novels/short stories 	Use

English Paper 1 consists of two sections A and B. Section A requires students to compose a ‘Directed Writing’ within a suggested time of 45 minutes. Section B on the other hand, is a ‘Continuous Writing’ section that requires students to write a 350-word composition within a suggested time of 1 hour. The following Table 2 shows a sample questions for both Section A and B of The Malaysian Certificate Examination English Language Paper, Paper 1.

Table 2: The Malaysian Certificate Education Examination English Language Paper, Paper 1 Sample Questions

<p>Section A : Directed Writing [35 marks] [Time suggested: 45 minutes]</p> <p>You are not satisfied with the conditions in your neighbourhood. You would like the District Council to take immediate action. Write a letter of complaint to the District Officer to express your dissatisfaction regarding this matter. You should include the following in your letter:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> rubbish dumped along roadside playground not maintained roads with potholes stray cats and dogs increasing in number clogged and smelly drains long and uncut grass <p>When writing your letter, you should remember to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> include all the points given elaborate on all the points given lay out the letter correctly <p>Note: For your letter, you will receive up to 15 marks for format and content points, and up to 20 marks for the quality of your writing.</p>
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Section B : Continuous Writing

[50 marks]

[Time suggested: One hour]

Write a composition of about 350 words on one of the following topics:

- 1 My childhood days
- 2 Teenagers have more problems than adults. Do you agree?
- 3 Describe the funniest event in your life.
- 4 Write a story beginning with: I didn't know what happiness was until..."
- 5 Words

The focus on writing in Paper 1 corresponds to the second objective (obtain, process and use information from various audio-visual and print sources; and present the information in spoken and written form) and the third objectives (listen to, view, read and respond to different texts and express ideas, opinions, thoughts and feelings imaginatively and creatively in spoken and written form) specified in the syllabus document. The question in Section B of the paper particularly requires the students to be 'creative and imaginative. Based on these questions, it may be concluded that the questions in Paper 1 are based on the framework of the syllabus document. However, one of the teachers, who was also an assessor in this examination process, noted:

The writing section, for Paper 1, both questions 1 and 2, when we mark, the emphasis is on grammar. When we mark the questions, what we will do is to read through and as we read, we would mark all the grammar errors. We may read through several times but basically, once we finish, we look at the paper and see whether are there a lot of errors or [whether] there are very little marks, just a few circles here and there. So, the papers with very little markings would definitely get high marks. The ones with a lot of markings, you know, get low marks. That's why I have to admit that grammar is an essential part of my teaching. I make the effort to explain grammar rules, do extra practice. Of course, I integrate [grammar] when I teach, in the classroom.

The above comment seems to suggest that the focus of grading the students' writing was on grammar. Students' grades depended almost exclusively on how grammatically accurate their writing was. This indicates a focus on 'usage' (Widdowson, 1978 which is the opposite of focus on 'use' (Widdowson, 1978) as specified by the syllabus document.

The Malaysian Certificate Education Examination English Language, Paper 2 is divided into four sections: A, B, C and D.

Section A consists of 15-multiple choice questions. The first eight questions are in the form of short reading paragraphs where students have to choose the best answers based on their comprehension. A sample of one of the questions is presented below.

Table 3: A sample question for Paper 2, Section A – Question 1-8

The protected elephants of West Bengal, India are hardly out of harms. In fact, since 2004, 27 have been killed by trains barreling down the hundred miles the hundred miles of track than run when they roam. Now the Ministry of Railways is under pressure to enforce speed limits, reduce travel at night (when most casualties occur) and prune vegetation to improve the drivers' view.

Based on the extract above, we can conclude that

- A most elephants in India die in train crash
- B most of the accidents happen at daytime
- C there is no speed limit for trains
- D the drivers have poor eyesight

To answer the above question correctly, students need to comprehend the paragraph which is in response to the second objective of the syllabus document – obtain, process and use information from various audio-visual and print sources; and present the information in spoken and written form. However, having to choose the correct answer would not provide an accurate measure of students' communicative ability as they only display their receptive skill but not their productive skill.

The following table shows samples of questions 9-15 from The Malaysian Certificate Education Examination English Language Paper, Paper 2, Section A.

Table 4: A sample question for Paper 2, Section A – Question 9-15

<p>Questions 9 – 15 are based on the following passage. Choose the best answer to fill in each blank.</p> <p>Observing my parents as I was growing up also taught me to value the concept of the family. My parents _____ (9) very close. At night my father would sit on the floor, _____ (10) his legs and lean against the main pillar of the house to talk to my mother. The pillar was his favourite spot and it was worn smooth _____ (11) the years because he leaned against it so often. He would smoke cheroot cigars and she would chew betel leaves. I do not know _____ (12) they discussed but they were very good companions and seemed to have _____ (13) to talk about all the time. They did not _____ (14) their affection for each other as it was unbecoming to do so, _____ (15) I know they loved each other very much. I feel blessed that I come from such a family background.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">Adapted from <i>A Doctor in the House</i> by Tun Dr. Mahathir</p>					
9	A	is	13	A	nothing
	B	are		B	anything
	C	was		C	something
	D	were		D	everything
10	A	stretch	14	A	reveal
	B	stretches		B	portray
	C	stretched		C	announce
	D	stretching		D	demonstrate
11	A	over	15	A	as
	B	while		B	but
	C	during		C	and
	D	between		D	because
12	A	why			
	B	what			
	C	when			
	D	whom			

Questions 9-15 on Section A, Paper 2 require students to select the most accurate answers which mainly revolve around grammatical items. There is no communicative value that can be attached to these questions. The apparent focus on grammar in this section does not support the ‘functional view’ that the syllabus document proposes (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Based on the sample questions in Table 3 and 4, it may be suggested that Section A of Paper 2 focuses more on ‘usage’ rather than ‘use’ (Widdowson, 1978).

Section B of the English Language Paper 2 consists of 10 questions (Questions 16-25) where students have to complete a graphic organizer using information they gather from a short text given. (see Appendix 1). This section carries 10 marks. The questions seem to correspond to the second objective (obtain, process and use information from various audio-visual and print sources; and present the information in spoken and written form) as students have to transfer the information from the short text to the graphic organizer (i.e. table, flow chart). However, the students need to provide only one or two-word answers for each question (all of these words are present in the text). This means that the students only need to identify the words and write them in the space provided. Once again, there is no communicative value that can be attached to the questions as all that is required is the identification of the correct forms (vocabulary). This kind of task corresponds to Widdowson’s ‘usage’ of language (1978) and Richards & Rogers’s (2001) ‘structural’ rather than ‘functional’ view of language.

Section C (Questions 26 – 30) is a reading comprehension section in which students have to answer 5 questions – equivalent to 10 marks – based on a long reading passage (see Appendix 2). The questions focus on testing students’ ability to comprehend ideas presented in the different paragraphs. Students are also expected to write a summary of no longer than 130 words (Question 31) based on the passage which will give students another 15 marks. The questions support the second objective (obtain, process and use information from various audio-visual and print sources; and present the information in spoken and written form). Based on the interviews conducted with the teachers, the grading of this section is based on how appropriate the answers are with very little regards to students’ accurate use of language. This is in tandem with the specifications of the syllabus document that support Widdowson’s (1978) focus on ‘use’ and Richards & Rogers’s (2001) ‘functional’ view of language.

Finally, Section D of the paper is a literature section that carries 20 marks (see Appendix 3). The open ended questions (Questions 32 and 33) given are based on poems, short stories, dramas as well as novels which are learned in class. The questions in this section correspond to the third objective (listen to, view, read and respond

to different texts and express ideas, opinions, thoughts and feelings imaginatively and creatively in spoken and written form). Marks for the questions are given based on appropriacy of the answers without much regards to the accuracy of grammar. Similar to the questions in Section C, the questions in Section D are in line with the specifications of the syllabus document as they focus on ‘use’ rather than ‘usage’ of language (Widdowson, 1978).

Based on the questions in both Paper 1 and 2 of the Malaysian Certificate Examination English Language Paper, it can be suggested that the focus is on reading, writing and grammar. Unlike the specifications of the syllabus document, the questions have the tendency to focus more on ‘usage’ rather than ‘use’ (Widdowson, 1978).

5. Discussion

Based on the documentary analysis conducted on the Malaysian ESL syllabus document and The Malaysian Certificate Examination English Language Paper, it may be concluded that the constructs of the two documents are not similar. Table 4 summarises three core areas of differences.

Table 5: The Construct of the Malaysian ESL Syllabus Document and the Malaysian Certificate Education Examination English Language Paper

No	Syllabus Document	Examination Paper
1	Focus on all four language skills – reading, writing, listening, speaking	Focus on reading, writing and grammar
2	Focus on functions of language – forms are to complement functions	Focus on forms of language – with some focus on functions of language
3	Focus on developing language use in communicative situations	Focus on developing accuracy

It has been established in the objectives of the syllabus document that teachers should focus on all four language skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking – in the effort to develop students’ communicative ability. However, the questions in the examination papers focus only on reading, writing and grammar. There is no evidence in the question paper that supports, for example, the first objective (form and maintain relationships through conversation and correspondence; take part in social interactions; and obtain goods and services) specified in the syllabus document. It may be argued that some objectives could have been achieved during some activities in the classrooms. However, the teachers interviewed explained how their lessons focused on reading and writing, and specifically aspects of reading and writing which are amenable to correction and grading. Teacher 1 explained,

I do tend to focus more on reading and writing in the class. Most of the tasks I give to the students are reading or writing. I have to admit that this is because of the exam and [because] reading and writing are a lot easier to grade, you know, [to] mark. Administration in the class is much easier for these two [skills], reading and writing. I’m not saying that listening and speaking are not important but, you know, the exam don’t focus on these two. I want my students to do well in their exams so I do what I can to help them.

The teachers were aware that their lessons were shaped by the construct of the examinations. In addition, in noting that this kind of classroom practice was ‘easier’, they were reflecting their own zone of competence and confidence. The conflict between the specifications of the syllabus document and the format of the examination has resulted in the teachers having to make a choice of focus in the classrooms and they seemed to rely on their skills and competencies in making the decisions.

It is also evident that the examination questions stress more on the forms of language – as opposed to the focus on functions specified in the syllabus document. The total mark for both Paper 1 and 2 is 155. Out of this total, 110 marks are awarded based on students’ grammatical accuracy (refer to Table 1). This does not correspond to the specifications of the syllabus document that support the ‘functional’ view of language (Richards & Rogers, 2001). The teachers were aware that the examination format puts emphasis on students’ grammatical accuracy. Even though they knew the focus in the classrooms should be on developing students’ communicative fluency and grammar should be integrated with the skills activities, they described how a decontextualized focus on grammar has become part of their teaching. One of the teachers said,

The syllabus says grammar should be integrated, but sometimes it’s a lot easier to teach grammar in isolation. I do integrate grammar, sometimes with reading or writing but sometimes, [I teach grammar] on its own. It’s a lot easier to measure. Grammar is even easier [as] right or wrong is definite. If the students get it right, it’s right [but] if it’s wrong, it’s wrong. So that’s why I think it’s easier to teach grammar on its own. It’s also easier to explain to students why they are right or wrong, and also with grammar, let say if there are 20 questions, the students can see for themselves why they get 18 or 10 marks because they get some answers wrong. With other skills, sometimes it’s difficult for me to explain why some [of them] get 10 marks for their

writing but some get only 5.

The above comment illustrates the chain of reasoning which facilitates washback: the format of the high stakes examination identifies what is measurable, and what can be shared with students in the classroom. The knowledge underpinning this kind of classroom practice gives the teachers credibility and confidence. Through the impact on teacher cognition, and more widely on teacher professional identity, the washback from the examination shapes and sustains this form of classroom practice, even when the syllabus guidelines are oriented differently.

The washback effect is a means for teachers to achieve an accommodation with the elements they do not control. The following comment from one of the teachers sums up this accommodation.

Following the exam is easier [because] at the end of the day, what matters is the results of the exam. I still teach them skills, vocab[ulary] and all that, I don't concentrate 100% on the exam. What I mean is, I give more attention to skills which are tested in the exam, yes, but those skills are also part of the skills students need to use English, so when I focus on exam, at the same time I also teach them what they need. Of course I focus more on reading and writing. We have oral exam but it's not really important, I mean it's done at school level so we have that under control. The exam gives a very clear focus [but] the syllabus, developing communicative skills, those are not clear goals. I mean, how do I know my students have developed communicative skills? Those are long-term goals. I can't measure that within, let's say, one school term. You need to understand that the number of students in the class is 30, 40 so, you know, if I want to teach all the topics and skills covered in the syllabus and the text book, there's not enough time. So the best solution, in my opinion, is follow the exam. This way, I get to teach what is important to the students. To many students and their parents passing the exam is important, very important.

This comment reveals three main issues with regard to the accommodation the teachers have to make. The first one is the teacher's belief. Ensuring her students to pass the examination was important to the teacher. As the constructs of the examination format and the specifications of the syllabus document are perceived as different, she had to opt for one of these as focusing on both was not possible. Her decision to follow the construct of the examination was based on her beliefs that in doing so, she would be able to assist her students achieve good grades as well as acquiring some skills which enabled them to become skillful English language users. The second issue relates to teachers' skills and competencies. The examination provided the teacher and the students a clear goal which could be measured in an objective manner. The syllabus document, however, specified communicative goals, which could not be measured within a specified period. The third issue is the class size. Managing the learning of a large class is made possible when the focus is on formal accuracy aspects of language, especially grammar, rather than on communicative skills. The teacher's reasoning on this point shows how attending to the learning of all students in a large class is effectively facilitated by transmission type teaching focusing on rules and accuracy rather than skills development. This pedagogy is supported by the demands of examination preparation, and thus facilitates the washback phenomenon described above.

6. Conclusion

Based on an analysis of the syllabus and the examination format, as framing documents for classroom practice, we have identified a test washback effect. The interviews where the teachers described their classroom practice and the rationale and motivations underpinning this, show a tendency to follow the examination format is shaping classroom activities. This tendency is the result of conscious decisions, which were based on the teachers' beliefs, skills and competencies, and rationalized as something practical and beneficial for their students.

We contend that such washback effects will continue to exist as long as the syllabus specifications and the construct of the examination focus on different goals and objectives, and are perceived as conflicting by teachers. The differences between the two documents mean the teachers would have to continue relying on their beliefs and competencies in making instructional decisions.

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Appendix 1

SECTION B

Read the following article and answer the questions that follow.

COCONUT

Coconut (*Cocos nucifera*) is grown in abundance in Malaysia and Southern Asia. Classified as a fruit, the coconut is actually a one-seeded drupe. All parts of the coconut can be used such as the water, milk, flesh and oil. A variety of coconut-derived ingredients from coconut oil to coconut milk are increasingly being used in kitchens, beauty products and for health.

Coconut oil is considered as the best and safest oil to use for cooking as it does not form polymerized oils or dangerous trans-fatty acids in our bodies, which can raise our cholesterol level and clog our arteries. It also makes a superb topical oil that can help to naturally rid the skin of dangerous toxins.

Coconut water is naturally refreshing. It is completely pure and sterile. In Malaysia, coconut water is administered to patients with measles as it is believed to be a cooling agent. Additionally, entrepreneurs have now commercialised coconut water. The water is now dubbed "Mother Nature's sports drink" by marketers. It has the highest concentration of electrolytes that makes it an excellent source of hydration. Coconut cream arises from coconut milk. Creams derived from the coconut can actually replenish the skin. The skin is moisturised, giving it a more youthful look and healthy glow. Beauty products such as a makeup remover, facial cleanser and skin moisturiser are getting more popular among women.

Questions 16 – 25

Based on the article given, complete the following table.

COCONUT			
Planted in: 16 _____			
By products	Coconut Oil	Coconut Water	17 _____
Benefits	It does not form:	20 _____	22 _____
	• polymerized oils	• source of hydration	
Used as	19 _____	21 _____	23 _____ 24 _____
	• topical oil		25 _____

[10 marks]

Appendix 2

SECTION C

Questions 26 – 31 are based on the following passage.

Nike is one of the best known brands today. The brand is so well known that the company routinely runs ads without mentioning the name. In fact, it is not surprising to find that most of the Nike products carry no brand identification other than the 'swoosh'. This is the power of marketing skills. That is why, no matter what your sport, chances are one of your favourite athletes wears the Nike 5 'swoosh'.

However, Nike knows that good marketing is more than promotional hype and promises – it means consistently delivering real value to customers. Nike's first success resulted from superior quality running and basketball shoes especially made for serious athletes who were frustrated by the lack of innovation 10 in athletic equipment. Until now, Nike leads the sports world for its innovation in product development.

"Just do it!" This slogan rocketed Nike sky-high in popularity and trust and this led it to become a way of life. When one laces up a Nike gear, in a small way, one is linked to all that Nike represents through popular sports apparel figures 15 such as Tiger Woods, Lionel Messi and Arjen Robben. They are best known for their competitive yet cool characteristics, which are closely matched with the brand thus relating to the syllogism "Nike is athletes, athletes are sports and therefore Nike is Sports". This is what Nike marketers want its customers to know. They want to build relationships between Nike, its athletes and its 20 customers.

A recent slump in sales and earning, which coincided with the global economic crisis, did not stop Nike from brashly predicting a healthy sales growth for the next five years. To meet this ambitious goal, Nike is moving aggressively into new product categories, sports and regions of the world. Nike's sports apparel 25 explosive business indicates Nike's success. Encouraged, Nike is now slapping its familiar "Swoosh" logo on everything from

sunglasses to soccer balls.

To chart glory for itself, Nike is now trying to break into the world's most popular sport – soccer. According to research, world soccer is a multibillion- dollar market. However, Nike has only managed to capture 3% of this market. 30 Therefore, Nike has made it a top priority to be the world's number one supplier of soccer footwear, apparel and equipment. To do so, Nike is looking towards World Cup 2014 to be the platform to launch its strategies to achieve this goal.

Elbowing its way to the top will not be easy, as Adidas has made a niche in the soccer world. Nike will have to work overtime to overthrow Adidas, which 35 has dominated the soccer world for the past fifty years. Nike has embarked on fierce marketing strategies. Nike's open wallet spending has dazzled the soccer world and its vast resources are rapidly changing the economics of the game.

Despite splashing multimillion dollars on sponsoring soccer games, Nike is not guaranteed an overwhelming success in the future. In fact, some Nike 40 watchers fear that Nike's global expansion will result in the loss of focus and over exposure of the Nike brand. Teenagers thrive to be different and therefore 'over swooshing' will lead to the brand becoming uncool, too common to be a statement.

(Adapted from The Star, 2008)

26 (a) From paragraph 1, how do we know that the Nike brand is well known? .

..... [1 mark]

(b) From paragraph 2, why were the serious athletes frustrated?

[1 mark]

27 From paragraph 3,

(a) what made Nike become a way of life?

..... [1 mark]

(b) what do Nike marketers want their customers to know?

..... [1 mark]

28 (a) From paragraph 4, which word has the same meaning as 'downfall'?

..... [1 mark]

(b) From paragraph 6, why has Nike embarked on fierce marketing strategies?

[1 mark]

29 From paragraph 7, what fears do Nike watchers have?

i.[1 mark]

ii.[1 mark]

30 In your own words, why do you think the author predicts that over swooshing could lead the Nike brand to become uncool?

.....
.....

[2 marks]

Question 31

Based on the passage, write a summary of:

- Nike's marketing strategies and
- Nike's ambitions

Your summary must:

- be in continuous writing form (not in note form)
- use materials from line 7 to line 38
- not be longer than 130 words, including the 10 words given below

Credit will be given for use of own words but care must be taken not to change the original meaning.

Begin your summary as follows:

Nike realizes that good marketing involves more than promotions and ...

[15 marks]

Appendix 3

SECTION D

32. Read the poem below and answer the questions that follow. Are You Still Playing Your Flute?

Are you still playing your flute?
When there is hardly time for our love
I am feeling guilty
To be longing for your song
The melody concealed in the slim hollow of the bamboo Uncovered by the breath of an artist
Composed by his fingers
Blown by the wind
To the depth of my heart.
Are you still playing your flute?
In the village so quiet and deserted Amidst the sick rice field
While here it has become a luxury To spend time watching the rain Gazing at the evening rays Collecting dew
drops
Or enjoying the fragrance of flowers.
Are you still playing your flute?
The more it disturbs my conscience
to be thinking of you
in the hazard of you
my younger brothers unemployed and desperate my people disunited by politics
my friend slaughtered mercilessly
this world is too old and bleeding
Zurinah Hassan

(a) Quote the line from the poem that shows the flautist is talented. [1 mark]

(b) Which word in stanza 2 means abandoned? [1 mark]

(c) What is the persona's feeling in stanza 3?
..... [1 mark]

(d) Using your own examples, state two social problems that concern society today.

Problem 1: [1 mark]

Problem 2: [1 mark]

33. The following are the novels studied in the literature component in English Language.

The Curse – Lee Su Ann

Step By Wicked Step – Anne Fine

Catch Us If You Can – Catherine MacPhail

Choose any one of the novels above and answer the question below. 'One should not give up hope, no matter what happens'

How is this shown in the novel you have read? Support your answer with close reference to the text.

[15 marks]