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BEYOND THE TEST SCORE: THE BROADER USE OF MUET IN MALAYSIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

Norhaslinda Hassan*

Academy of Language Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA, Cawangan Pulau Pinang, Permatang Pauh, 13500, Pulau Pinang
Malaysia
haslinda.hassan@uitm.edu.my

*Corresponding Author email: haslinda.hassan@uitm.edu.my

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editor@readersinsight.net

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ABSTRACT

The present study seeks to explore the test use and consequences of the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), a high-stakes university entry test in Malaysia that is used as an entry requirement for undergraduate education in Malaysia. It is deemed important to look into the consequences, particularly its washback associated with the use and interpretation of MUET as these consequences need to be understood in relation to the context in which the test is being implemented. Evaluation of large-scale assessment programs that are implemented to enhance educational quality involves investigating both their intended and unintended consequences. Therefore, this study sets out to examine both the intended and actual use and consequences of the MUET. Participants of this study include MUET test developers and students who have already taken the MUET and are currently situated in a diverse educational environment. A qualitative method was employed by means of document analysis and focused-group discussion. It was found that MUET has an impact in academic contexts as the students' experience of taking MUET has improved their proficiency in English as well as their motivation to learn English.

Keywords: *Test Use; Consequences; MUET Higher Education; Academic Context; Washback*

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

Intended Washback of the MUET: The intended washback that is closely related to the educational context is to measure the English language proficiency of candidates who intend to pursue first-degree studies. The MUET is intended to help institutions make better decisions about the readiness of prospective students for academic coursework, and about their ability to use and understand English in different contexts in the environment of higher education.

Actual Washback of the MUET: Students of the present study perceived that the new MUET format is difficult, especially the writing component. They also believe that speaking and writing skills are important although they view MUET as just an entry test. Ultimately, they think that English is easy. In terms of the consequences of MUET in the academic context, the students are aware that there is a continuation in English proficiency for academic purposes. Hence, they are more confident when speaking English, widen their vocabulary, and intensify their writing skill after taking MUET. Moreover, they understand better the importance of English as a bachelor's degree student.

Research Objectives

This study intends to investigate the consequences, i.e., the washback effect of MUET in the education and social contexts. Therefore, the research objectives are as follows:

1. To identify the intended consequences of the MUET.
2. To examine the actual uses of the MUET in the educational context and the value implications underlying the actual uses.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative method, which included two phases. The first phase includes document analysis (content analysis) and interviews with the test developers. Phase two includes Focused Group Discussion (FGD) with test users in the educational context. Participants of this study include 2 officials from Majlis Peperiksaan Malaysia (MPM) and students who had sat the recent MUET. The officials from MPM will provide test developers' insights on the intended washback of MUET to help answer research objective 1. For research objective 2, students who had sat MUET will be recruited. They consist of 5 undergraduate students. Interviews were transcribed and thematically analyzed using Nvivo 12.

Results

The intended washback of the MUET is to measure the English language proficiency of candidates intending to pursue first-degree studies. This intended washback aimed to assist institutions in making informed decisions regarding prospective students' readiness for academic coursework and their ability to comprehend and utilize English across various contexts in higher education environments.

The actual washback, as perceived by participants, reflected mixed sentiments. Some participants found the new format challenging, particularly the writing component. The importance of speaking and writing skills was emphasized, with participants acknowledging the difficulty of the entry test while expressing the perception that English, overall, is an easy language. In the academic context, the consequences of the assessment revealed positive outcomes. Participants reported a continuation in English proficiency for academic purposes, increased confidence in speaking English, a broader vocabulary, and heightened writing skills. Moreover, there was a heightened understanding of the significance of English as a language skill for bachelor's degree students.

Several factors were identified as promoting positive washback. Intrinsic motivation, characterized by personal interest and engagement, played a significant role. Additionally, parental involvement was recognized as a contributing factor to success, along with the implementation of more formative assessments throughout the learning process. Conversely, certain factors were identified as inhibiting the desired washback. Social influences, such as friends and teachers, as well as the overall environment, were reported to hinder participants' perceptions of the test, with an emphasis on merely passing it rather than engaging with the learning process. Overcoming these inhibiting factors may be crucial for achieving the intended washback and fostering a more comprehensive and effective English language learning experience.

Overall, the washback of the MUET appears to be mixed. While the intended impact focuses on measuring language skills for academic and professional purposes, actual student perception leans towards viewing it as a test to simply pass. However, positive consequences such as improved academic English skills and increased confidence suggest the test can be a valuable tool for student development. To maximize the positive

washback and promote sustained English learning, fostering intrinsic motivation, parental involvement, and utilizing more formative assessment practices are crucial.

Findings

Based on the results, it can be concluded that the informants of the present study believed that the MUET is important in their academic endeavors for a few reasons. Ultimately, they agreed that the MUET is important for their future career. Moreover, it is important to enhance their English proficiency and self-confidence, which is of utmost importance in their students' lives. Specifically, the students strongly feel that the MUET test battery plays an important role in enhancing their communication skills and self-confidence, i.e., a significant skill sought after among the students. Apart from that, the students felt that the assessment components were quite challenging, which made the MUET test battery difficult. However, they are aware that their lack of practice, and not proficient in grammar are among the reasons for them failing to score well. Their awareness is a positive indicator that the students are able to evaluate themselves. Ganapathy and Ying's (2016), study of the negative attitude students have toward learning English revealed that the problem lay in the inadequacies in terms of teaching and resources and a lack of effort to impart awareness of the importance of mastering the language. Most washback studies reported mixed feelings among students like Cheng (1998), and Yu (2010). Also, similar findings were reported in the Malaysian context (e.g., Ayub Khan et al., 2019; Mahmud, 2018; Hassan, et. al. 2021). Based on the findings, it is safe to conclude that the majority of the students had a positive conception of the MUET test battery. It is interesting to note that Zhan (2009: 46), listed six complexities of washback on students' attitudes. Therefore, it is safe to conclude that: 1) tests may exert positive influence on students' feelings and attitude, 2) Tests may cause both positive and negative feelings and attitudes among students and 3) tests may have washback effect for some students but not others (Alderson & Wall, 1993).

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Author's Biography



Norhaslinda Hassan (Ph.D.) is a senior lecturer at the Academy of Language Studies, University Teknologi MARA Cawangan Pulau Pinang. She holds a PhD in Language Testing from the Kulliyah of Education, International Islamic University Malaysia. Her research interests include test impact, formative and summative assessment, and learning-oriented assessment.