Washback in Language Learning Strategies Under High Stakes Language Testing - A Study of the Hong Kong Secondary System

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Article information	*Abstract*
Article history: *Received: 11 Apr 2023* *Revised: 12 Oct 2023* *Accepted: 25 Nov 2023* *Keywords:* *English assessment* *Washback* *Validity* *Hong Kong* *High-stakes assessment*	*This research delves into the washback effects of the Hong Kong Diploma of Education Examination (HKDSE) on the learning strategies employed by secondary school students in Hong Kong. By surveying 50 students to assess their English learning strategy profiles, this study seeks to identify potential biases in strategy selection indicative of examination influence. A subset of participants was further interviewed, enabling a deeper exploration of the underlying reasons behind their strategy choices. Thematic analysis of these interviews revealed that while students recognize the intended washback of the examination on their learning strategies, its actual influence might be diminished by their reservations regarding high stakes testing's effect on authentic English learning. The overarching sentiment expressed frustrations and conflict between the study of English language, and exam-centric pressures.*

INTRODUCTION

The Hong Kong Diploma of Education Examination (HKDSE) is an end-of-school examination in Hong Kong taken by roughly 95% (HKEAA, 2021a; Education Bureau, 2021a) of the Hong Kong schooling population at the end of their secondary education. In addition to providing proof of learning for the six years of secondary education, the HKDSE provides scores used for university entrance, leading to its high-stakes nature. The magnitude of this examination is further evident in how schools leverage top results as promotional tools, prominent publishers like Oxford University Press (2022) analyse test papers annually for pedagogical insights, and the extensive shadow education industry, boasting over 1000 tutorial centres, meticulously develops strategies based on exam patterns (Chak, 2020). Moreover, the media annually showcases top HKDSE performers, emphasizing the societal weight of this examination.

Central to the HKDSE's subjects is English Language, classified as a "core" subject. This designation means that to qualify for any undergraduate programme at a local university, students must score above a Level 3 in the examination. Failing to do so would disqualify a student from entering university regardless of their other subject scores. This, in addition to the infamously high amount of stress that the examination causes to even high-scoring students (Kang, 2015), adds to the controversial debate as to the benefits and drawbacks of a singular, all-important

test which effectively determines the social mobility of a student's life. It becomes necessary for such a high stakes test to not only justify its scoring reliability and content validity, but also its consequences and impact on society (Weir, 2005).

Washback, the influence of an exam on teaching and learning, is a key metric to evaluate such implications. Since Alderson and Wall's (1993) foundational washback model, the field has become a significant focus in high stakes testing studies (Allen & Tahara, 2021). While the Hong Kong government posits that the HKDSE enhances educational quality, this paper critically examines this assertion. Specifically, it delves into the HKDSE English paper's aim of fostering self-directed learning and varied language-learning strategies. In shedding light on this topic, this research aspires to enrich the discourse around the potential benefits of high stakes testing in fostering positive washback.

This study stems from a recognised need to understand the broader societal and educational implications of the HKDSE, especially within the framework of English language learning in high stakes testing. This study attempts to form part of a thorough investigation to ascertain whether the examination is fulfilling its purported objectives and contributing to the holistic development of learners, thus further uncovering ramifications on assessment policies and pedagogical practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of the HKDSE

Due to Hong Kong's political and geographical proximity to mainland China, its long history of examination system is heavily influenced by the Kējǔ mechanism used in dynastic China to select the empire's most relied-upon officials (O'Sullivan & Cheng, 2022; Qian, 2008). To this end, the purpose of examinations in Hong Kong has always primarily been that of selection for higher of education and desirable occupations. Kennedy et al. (2006) observed that examinations have become so ingrained that society is extremely sensitive to any change in assessment mechanism. The negative effect of this sensitivity can be seen through the controversial implementation of the Territory-Wide System Assessment (TSA) scheme. Despite the authorities' attempt to stress the low stakes of TSA tests by saying that the results would not be used for any selection or ranking purposes, parents and schools fiercely opposed its implementation (Lau & Sou, 2018) mainly due to their distrust of the claims. Despite this potential for negativity, it is difficult to completely deny that this sensitive relationship with testing can be leveraged to promote desirable learning behaviour among students.

The Hong Kong Examination and Assessment Authorities (HKEAA) and the Education Bureau (EDB) have made steps towards this aim. The English paper of the HKDSE is a four-skills test which assesses students' abilities to read, write, speak, and comprehend spoken English in a variety of situations, similar to some international tests of English like the IELTS and the TOEFL. In addition to pen-and-paper tests that students sit for in a tightly controlled environment, there is also a school-based assessment (SBA) component that is carried out by the students'

own teachers to provide a more holistic and valid measurement of student abilities (Yip & Cheung, 2005). This is also done in the hopes of lowering the stakes of the main examination as well as promoting positive washback on teaching and learning (HKEAA, 2021b).

In the English Language subject, the curriculum documents of the Hong Kong Education Bureau states that the English curriculum should align with the HKDSE assessment to promote self-directed learning in students that realise the following goals:

> • learn how to learn;
> • make choices as to what, when and how they want to learn;
> • use a range of language development strategies;
> • carry out self-assessment and reflection;
> • plan, monitor and evaluate the strategies adopted and their own learning effectiveness, which forms the basis for goal-setting in subsequent tasks or activities (Education Bureau, 2021b, p. 52)

It is worth evaluating these efforts, and seeing how effective they have been in promoting the kind of learning that is happening among students.

Washback

Washback has been investigated in the Hong Kong context before. Cheng (1997) conducted a study investigating the behaviours of English teachers following a change in the format of the university entrance tests. This topic was revisited later (Cheng, 2004) after the implementation of the current HKDSE testing system. In both studies, it was found that the adaptations of teachers to tests resided mainly in content and other superficial aspects. This is to say that the tests did little to promote methodological changes.

Research into washback on learners, though relatively rarer in both the Hong Kong context and the wider field of Applied Linguistics research, indicate similar findings. Andrews et al. (2002) and Smart (2017) investigated the speaking component of the previous testing system and the current HKDSE system, respectively. Tsang and Isaacs (2021) investigated the washback on students by the unique formatting of the Reading and Writing papers. The results of the studies indicated findings that coincided with Cheng's (1997, 2004) on teachers – that influence on performance might be superficial, or even negative.

One of the possible reasons for this might be due to the multi-faceted nature of washback, which has many mediating factors. On the teachers' end, personal beliefs, education, and academic background all play roles – with test content showing very little relationship with teaching methodology (Watanabe, 2004). Allen (2016) investigated learner washback in the IELTS tests and found learner perceptions and their access to resources to play strong roles, among a complex array of factors. Of note is that the importance of a test is observed to significantly influence the willingness of students to participate in test preparation (Dong, 2020). As the HKDSE is the de facto school leaving examination in Hong Kong, it is possible that the HKEAA relies mostly on this to maintain consequential validity.

Additionally, washback can be measured in many dimensions such as specificity, intensity, length, intentionality, and value (Watanabe, 2004). For example, the aspect of intentionality can help identify whether stated washback aims are being achieved. Although there have been studies indicating that students respond to examination by focusing on test-oriented practice (Saglam & Farhady, 2019), there have been few studies done specifically on the topic of language learning strategies (LLS) because of washback, even though the use of language learning strategies is one of the most effective predictors of success in language acquisition (Cohen, 2014; Naiman, 1996).

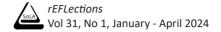***Language learning strategies (LLS)***

Language Learning Strategies (LLS) are specific actions, behaviours, or techniques used by learners to enhance their language comprehension, production, and retention (Horwitz & Oxford, 1991). These strategies are deliberate choices made by learners to manage and regulate their language learning processes. LLS encompass a broad range of tactics including mnemonic devices, repetition, summarizing, guessing meaning from context, and using bilingual dictionaries, among others.

The utilization of LLS is widely acknowledged to play a significant role in enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of language learning, particularly in the ESL context (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). Effective use of these strategies can lead to improved language comprehension, greater retention, and enhanced speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Moreover, they can promote learner autonomy, which is crucial for sustained language learning success over time (Benson et al., 2001; Dicker et al., 1994). Peacock and Ho (2003) also found that the proficiency level of learners can significantly influence their choice and use of learning strategies; often, more proficient learners are found to employ a wider variety of strategies more effectively and more frequently. These results are confirmed by Feng et al. (2019) in a study with learners of Spanish.

Many of these descriptors and traits overlap with the goals of the HKDSE assessment quoted above. In addition, the English Curriculum documents (Education Bureau, 2021b, pp. 11 – 12, 93 – 94) also specify the following goals:

- Introducing students systematically to a good variety of text types and widening the range of text types at higher levels of learning
- Develop language development strategies in order to become motivated, independent, and responsible for their own learning.
- Developing thinking, reference, information, and enquiry skills
- Develop skills to manage and evaluate one's own learning, self-motivation, and the ability to work with others

It is thus clear that being able to encourage learners to utilize LLS effectively could be considered a positive form of washback for a public test. Investigating the use of LLS among Hong Kong students could provide evidence for the presence of such washback. However, such a look into this specific area of test impact has been largely absent.

Thus, this paper proposes the following research questions:

RQ1. Does positive washback exist among students in terms of their language learning strategy (LLS) use?

RQ2. How do learners interpret their own learning strategy choices?

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-method approach, wherein both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis are performed. The advantage of this approach stems from the concept of triangulation, necessitating integration at various stages, including forming questions, during sampling, data collection, analysis, and making interpretations (Hashemi, 2012). According to the categorization of mixed-method research by Creswell (2014), this study falls under the 'sequential explanatory' classification, in which quantitative data is collected and analysed before qualitative designs are employed to further elucidate the results.

Participants

Sixty Hong Kong students from a local secondary school were invited to participate in the study. The participants were all students of the researcher, and they had all recently left school after their final year in preparation for the HKDSE examination. Although this method of sampling might not produce a completely representative population, efforts were made to ensure students selected were between the ages of 17 and 19, were ethnic Chinese learners of English, and had a level of English proficiency that between CEFR A2 and B2 according to their school results. This profile falls within the proficiency levels of more than 80% of students sitting for the HKDSE, according to an IELTS benchmarking done by the HKEAA (2019) and could be considered representative of the larger situation in Hong Kong.

 A section that collected demographic data in the questionnaire showed that all respondents had started studying English together with formal schooling in Hong Kong, and their main aim of studying the language is university studies. Of the invited students, 50 returned the questionnaire surveys. Participants were invited to a follow-up interview by leaving their contact details. Six candidates who agreed to the interview were chosen based on their answers in the questionnaire, employing a purposeful sampling method (Palinkas et al., 2013) to ensure a diverse range of proficiency levels and usage of LLS were included.

Strategy inventory for language learning (SILL)

The SILL is a widely recognized instrument designed to assess the language learning strategies used by learners of second or foreign languages. This inventory covers a range of LLS that learners may use to facilitate their language acquisition and proficiency around six distinct categories:

- Memory strategies: Involving strategies such as grouping, imagery, rhyming, and structured reviewing.
- Cognitive strategies: Includes reasoning, analysing, summarising, and general practicing.
- Compensation strategies: To compensate for limited knowledge, such as guessing meaning from context and using synonyms or gestures to convey meaning.
- Metacognitive strategies: Such as paying attention, consciously searching for practice opportunities, planning for language tasks, self-evaluation of progress, and monitoring error.
- Affective strategies: Such as anxiety reduction, self-encouragement, and self-reward
- Social strategies: Such as asking questions, cooperating with native speakers of the language, and becoming culturally aware (Horwitz & Oxford, 1991, p. 5)

These categories encompass a holistic view of language learning, addressing both the cognitive and social dimensions.

 The SILL has been translated into a multitude of language to be utilized in many studies across different contexts, demonstrating its versatility and relevance in understanding language learning strategies. Additionally, the SILL has been empirically validated across various linguistic and cultural contexts, lending it a high degree of reliability and validity (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995). The translation used in this study is adapted from Yang (2004).

In this study, results from the SILL were first tabulated in a descriptive manner. This helped with providing a primary look at whether there was significant bias in how participants studied English. A statistical test was then applied to compare the means of different learning strategies and determine whether they were significantly different. As the SILL measures each participant multiple times on the use of different LLS, a repeated measures ANOVA test was deemed suitable for analysis (Judd et al., 2017).

Semi-structured interviews

During the interview, participants were shown their own choices in the questionnaire and given a simple tabulation of their average scores in different categories. Participants are asked to elaborate on their choices to gain a better understanding of why they choose to learn in certain ways. They were also given hypothetical situations and asked how they might change their strategy accordingly. The following questions were formed based on the answers provided by participants on the SILL. These questions sought clarification on why they favoured their prominent LLS and how they could potential adjust them. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009)'s guide on interview techniques was referred to and their advice on using broad, non-specific questioning to allow participants to retain their own voice was taken into consideration. The questions formed the standardised basis of the interviews:

1. Why do you seem to prefer these strategies?
2. Why do you seem to avoid these strategies?
3. Do you feel disadvantaged in any parts of your English exams because of how you study English?

4. If the exams changed and became only focused on [a test type/skill type] that you're not very confident in, would you change how you study?
5. Do you think you will continue to study English after your university entrance exams? How would your study habits change?

The participants are given a choice in the language that the interviews are conducted in. All participants chose to have the interview in Chinese (either Cantonese or Mandarin), which is their native tongue. This is desirable as participants can utilise their full linguistic and affective repertoire and improve the quality of the data collected (Rolland et al., 2019).

All six interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were translated into English and qualitatively analysed following a thematic analysis approach, which includes the steps of data familiarisation, coding, theme searching, review, definition, and report writing. It provides a detailed account of data themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Burnard (1991) provides a stage-by-stage process of analysing interview data through this framework in fourteen stages, from immersion in the transcribed data of the interview to improving the reliability of the analysis. This process was adapted and used in this study, with changes mainly made due to limited access to participants and the use of word processing software rather than pen and paper in the original publication. No qualitative data processing software was used. The process involves reading the transcripts both individually and across all participants to become immersed within the data, which helps the researcher systematically uncover common themes that would help explain the experience and mindset of the interviewees.

RESULTS

SILL results

Table 1 below shows the mean scores of the SILL across the six different strategies. Among the respondents, metacognitive strategies received the highest mean score of 3.42, meaning that it is the most popular strategy among the learners surveyed. Conversely, memory strategies yielded the lowest mean score of 2.91, meaning that it is the least popular.

Table 1
Results of SILL survey on English learning strategies (Mean)

	Memory Strategies	Cognitive Strategies	Compensation Strategies	Metacognitive Strategies	Affective Strategies	Social Strategies
Mean	2.91	3.35	3.33	3.42	3.05	3.24

Table 2 shows a breakdown of the mean scores and standard deviations (S.D.) for responses to individual questions (Q1 to Q14) categorized under six different strategy types: Memory, Cognitive, Compensation, Metacognitive, Affective, and Social Strategies.

Table 2
Results of SILL survey on English learning strategies

	Memory Strategies		Cognitive Strategies		Compensation Strategies		Metacognitive Strategies		Affective Strategies		Social Strategies	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Q1	3.51	0.82	3.43	0.87	3.82	0.95	3.27	0.88	3.37	1.03	3.71	0.91
Q2	3.12	0.93	3.59	1.15	3.12	1.20	3.55	0.89	3.45	1.04	3.08	1.17
Q3	2.82	1.18	3.69	1.00	2.92	1.22	3.88	0.90	2.80	1.43	3.29	1.15
Q4	3.59	0.98	3.55	0.89	3.43	1.10	4.02	0.85	3.82	1.01	3.35	1.16
Q5	2.94	1.28	3.53	1.08	2.71	1.26	3.06	0.99	1.76	1.23	2.88	1.01
Q6	2.14	1.04	4.04	0.93	4	0.98	3.06	1.14	3.10	1.10	3.16	1.39
Q7	1.98	1.01	2.78	1.05	-	-	3.24	0.95	-	-	-	-
Q8	3.12	0.97	2.76	1.18	-	-	3.39	0.73	-	-	-	-
Q9	2.94	1.30	3.04	1.17	-	-	3.35	0.88	-	-	-	-
Q10	-	-	3.22	1.16	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Q11	-	-	3.49	1.16	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Q12	-	-	3.45	1.16	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Q13	-	-	3.43	1.00	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Q14	-	-	2.96	1.1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Note: The scale of answers on the SILL questionnaire spans from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating "Never or almost never true of me — means that the statement is very rarely true of me" and 5 indicating "Always or almost always true of me — means that the statement is true of you almost always."

The answers were given on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 representing low usage of a particular learning strategy and 5 representing high usage. Each row represents a specific question, while each column under a strategy type delineates the mean and standard deviation of responses for that question. The missing data from Q7 to Q14 under some strategy types, denoted by dashes, means that there were fewer questions for that strategy type. This is due to the design of the SILL which incorporates research accounting for the variety of practices in each strategy type. Cognitive strategies, for example, is found to have the greatest variety and thus has the greatest number of items (Oxford & Burry-Stock, 1995).

The mean scores, indicative of the average response, span a range from 1.76 to 4.04. Although the most and least popular overall strategies, as mentioned above, are metacognitive and memory respectively, the most popular practice is observed under Q6 of cognitive strategies ("I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English."). Meanwhile, the least popular practice is Q7 of memory strategies ("I physically act out new English words.")

Other practices that were particularly highly or lowly rated include Q4 under metacognitive strategies ("I try to find out how to be a better learner of English.") with a mean of 4.02 and Q3 ("I pay attention when someone is speaking English.") with a mean of 3.88. This indicates that these practices are particularly popular with students. Conversely, memory strategies were less favoured, demonstrated by lower mean scores for Q7 as previously mentioned, or Q6 ("I use flashcards to remember new English words.") (Mean = 2.14). This reflects that while popular practices for language learning might be found across a variety of strategy types, memory strategies seem to contain most of the least popular practices. The standard deviations range from 0.73 to 1.43, reflecting the differing levels of agreement or application of these strategies among respondents.

As mentioned in the literature review, frequent usage of LLS in greater variety is desirable for successful language learning. As the above results seem to suggest that students are favouring only certain practices and strategy types, inferential statistics was used to ascertain whether this difference was significant. To delve deeper into the significance of these preferences and their variation across different respondents, a Repeated Measures ANOVA test was conducted. Preliminary checks were done to ascertain the assumptions of sphericity; however, Mauchly's test of sphericity unveiled a violation of this assumption, $\chi 2(14) = 39.527$, $p < .001$. Consequently, a Greenhouse-Geisser correction was applied ($\varepsilon = .779$) to ensure the robustness of the findings. The findings from the Repeated Measures ANOVA underscored a significant difference in the choice of learning strategies among the respondents, $F(3.9, 187.04) = 11.56$, $p < .001$. The post-hoc paired t-test test using a Bonferroni corrected $\alpha = .0033$ indicated that the means of the following pairs are significantly different:

- Memory-Cognitive
- Memory-Compensation
- Memory-Metacognitive
- Memory-Social
- Cognitive-Affective
- Metacognitive-Affective

These findings highlight the variation in strategy preference while also suggesting a significant bias in the choice of strategies employed by the participants that cannot be explained by randomness or data error. In particular, it can be seen that the use of memory strategies is significantly lower compared to all of the other LLS types. This suggests that memory strategies such as grouping, imagery, rhyming, and structured reviewing are being excluded by learners. A similar bias against affective strategies can be seen, albeit to a lower level. Meanwhile, cognitive and metacognitive strategies are significantly more popular.

In other words, the participants are significantly favouring certain strategies rather than using an equal variety of them in their learning in a systematic way, which could potentially indicate a narrowing of learning scope. This narrowing of learning was discussed by Green (2006), who pointed out that students tend to favour strategies that correspond specifically to test formats. Under the current context, this exclusion of certain strategies in the students' repertoire could possibly be interpreted as negative washback.

Interview results

The general theme of the interviews was the participants' explanations of their choices of learning strategies. From there, participants explored three main categories of discussion: rationales, perceived consequences, and tools used. The codes that emerged in each category can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3
Themes and categories from interview analysis

General theme	Categories	Codes
Why certain learning strategies are favoured	Rationales	Self-image as language user
		Interests as a motivator
	Consequences of choice and alternate scenarios	Disadvantages of current choices
		Remaining unchanged
		Studying English without examinations
	Tools used	References to modern resources

From the category "Rationales"

Self-image as language user

For many participants (n = 4), whether to avoid or adopt certain strategies was based on their self-image — this includes how they saw themselves using English, what situations they imagined themselves using English in, and how proficient they believed themselves to be.
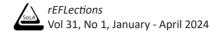
Interview with L:

Interviewer: Can you say a bit more about why you don't enjoy reading?

L: Because my English level can't help me to read books that are at my knowledge level. In Chinese, I read subject-specific books like biology, but actually there is a lot of terminology which I don't understand. There is a lot- I read literature in Chinese too, but there's not a lot of English literature that I understand. The gap between the two is too great.

Additionally, two participants had very elaborate theories of how English functioned, which they used to inform what choices they made in terms of learning strategies, as well as how this may cause an adoption of specific learning strategy. This indicates a level of self-perceived proficiency and confidence in the morphology of English, and also provides elaboration on how learners who elect cognitive strategies interpret their own learning.

Interview with W:

W: From my personal understanding, English vocabulary is compounded. I think they used to look different but had new things added to them, so I try to guess their meanings based on what they look like.

Interests as a motivator

Overall, a common theme among the participants was that they chose their strategies based on hobbies or interests (n = 5) — watching videos online (mainly through YouTube) and listening to music in English are common. Three of the respondents also decided their primary strategy because of hobbies that they picked up when they were younger.

Interview with L:

L: I try to make learning English fun for myself. There's a band I really like from Australia, so I try to study English by listening to their songs, or by watching YouTube videos.

Interview with C:

C: Usually when I watch YouTube videos, they use a lot of content from shows – like Friends. Characters in shows converse in a very spoken way, so I really like to watch those. The videos first show you a scene without subtitles, then pause, and you can see if you understood what they said. I like that way more.

Interview with V:

V: I came to Hong Kong when I was little, and here there is more importance placed on English compared to the mainland. At that time, I liked to watch films in English. I know a lot of people like to watch films with subtitles and when they do it, they only read the subtitles and ignore the English. At that time, I liked to listen to their pronunciation and then read the subtitles and try to see if there are words I've memorised or already know.

This also shows that learners are generally more comfortable with self-access materials (n = 5), especially if these materials are entertaining in nature and provide them with samples of what could be perceived as authentic language. There is also a noted lack of "official" materials mentioned, such as textbooks.

From the category "consequences of choice and alternate scenarios"

Disadvantages of current choices

When participants were asked how they felt they might have been disadvantaged by their choice of strategies, all of them (n = 6) pointed to specific portions of the current public test they would be sitting for. While some generalised by saying that they were weak with specific tests (e.g., the listening paper, the speaking paper), others were able to pinpoint exact test items that they disliked seeing. This shows that the respondents are aware of a possible gap in their learning that is made apparent in their performance in the public examination.

Interview with V:

Interviewer: So, grammar and vocabulary are areas you feel disadvantaged in. Which paper do you think is harder for you because of this?

V: Can I focus on a specific type of question?

Interviewer: Of course.

V: Summary cloze.

Interviewer: When you read a text and fill in gaps with vocabulary. You really hate that part, then?

V: It makes my head explode.

Interview with W:

Interviewer: What do you think your study style is the worst at preparing you for?

W: Grammar.

Interviewer: Which papers? Or which parts of a paper?

W: That's a question I feel very strongly about. Before when I did practice papers - the reading paper. Sometimes there are gap filling questions, you have to find the words, like verbs and nouns, in the text and change the tenses sometimes. You know that my grammar foundation is not good. Sometimes you find the word in the paragraph, and you know the meaning, but you fill it in without adding an "s" or changing the tenses - when that happens, you don't get the marks. That really stings. You know the answer, but you don't get the marks because of little mistakes.

Remaining unchanged

Participants were then also asked what they might do to better prepare for these portions that they were weak in, and whether they would try other strategies to fill these gaps in ability. Most of them (n = 5) answered that they would not change how they studied, and some were particularly resolute with their response (n = 2). Some said they would do practices on the specific type of tests that they were performing poorly at but would not change their learning strategies otherwise (n = 3). Some initially said that they would change strategies, but when asked to elaborate, said that they would probably continue doing the same thing that they were already comfortable with doing (n = 2). This, again, reflects an awareness on students' part of the curriculum's effort at diversifying their learning activities. However, it also shows an unwillingness to cooperate accordingly.

Interview with V:

Interviewer: Do you do anything to help with it? Or do you just give up when you see it?

V: No. Practices, I guess. When you do more of those, there is still a pattern to be found.

Interview with T:

Interviewer: This year, the speaking paper has been cancelled – how do you feel about the speaking paper?

T: I'm afraid of it. Afraid about making mistakes or saying something with poor grammar or missing certain parts when I try to express myself.

Interviewer: Do you feel relieved that it's been cancelled?

T: Yes.

Interviewer: Has the cancellation changed how you study English?

T: No. I still just go online and do exercises and look at some words.

Interviewer: Let's say that other papers are also cancelled, and only listening is left. Would you do anything to try and adapt to that change?

T: Probably. I think I would listen more, and maybe look at more words.

Interviewer: By that, you mean reading?

T: Yes.

Interviewer: So, to you, your favourite way to study English is by reading.

T: Yes.

Some participants made it very clear test preparation and learning English are separate activities to them (n = 3), and one expressed that he felt that preparations for "examination English" were specifically interfering with his attempts to actually study English.

Interview with C:

Interviewer: So according to your answers, studying English for cultural interests and for exams are in conflict.

C: Yes. There is a conflict.

Interviewer: Do you think you can only do one?

C: I think they're not the same thing.

Interviewer: So, you feel that to study for exams, you have to give up time for studying English.

C: The things I have to do for exams are different from the things I have to do for my interests. There is a gap between them.

5.2.2.c. Studying English without examinations

Although all participants agreed that they would continue to study English even after their university entrance exam is over, some expressed that they would change their behaviour to study in a less exams-oriented manner (n = 3). Overall, there is a clear theme that the respondents are frustrated due to the perception that studying English in a test-oriented manner does not allow them to improve their English abilities in a meaningful way.

Interview with J:

Interviewer: You would watch native speakers speak more and observe how they naturally put together sentences.

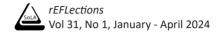J: Yes. That's the most important thing.

Interviewer: Why do you feel you're not doing that now? Or not doing more of it?

J: It's not very helpful to the whole English exam. It's helpful for Paper 3, but I can't just look at one paper alone. There is also reading, writing, and speaking before they announced that it would be cancelled this year. So, as a DSE candidate I have to do things that are exam oriented. I can't, at this moment, only do things I'm interested in. Of course, it's a different story after the DSE is over.

From the category "Tools used"

References to modern resources

Though this was not one of the initial focus points of the study, it was noticed during analysis that the learners referred very often to tools in the internet age when talking about how they study English (n = 4).

Interview with T:

Interviewer: But for English, what do you do when you study for it? Like reading the news, and…

T: Lately, I've been looking at online videos from tutorial schools. There are exercises there that I work on.

Interview with J:

Interviewer: How do you think you would change after the DSE? Do you think you'd continue studying English?

J: There's no stopping. You have to study English.

Interviewer: How do you think you would change in how you study?

J: I won't get to come to school. I won't take courses either. I think I'd use my phone, and videos, and go on YouTube and see how this guy and that guy might speak. Then hopefully I can sound more native and try my best to get as good at it as I am in my native language and just know it when I see it.

This includes multiple references to online video platforms. There are also mentions of traditional media, such as newspapers, being accessed through personal devices. Alongside this, it was also noted that there was an absence of mentioning textbooks, schoolteachers, or most things related to formal school-based language lessons when talking about their learning habits.

DISCUSSION

Following the quantitative results of the SILL that identified significant differences between the use of different strategies by HKDSE students, the qualitative questionnaire sought to identify reasons for this difference, as well as highlight how the HKDSE test might have contributed to the avoidance of certain strategies and a heavier focus on others. The results also helped to answer the two research questions posed.

Evidence of biased use of LLS

In relation to the first research question on the nature of washback (RQ1), the results of quantitative analysis indicate that there is a significant tendency for the participants to favour metacognitive strategies and shun memory ones. However, this does not appear to be due to the test failing to cover certain content. Students are evidently aware of the test's attempts to test certain features of language, such as their ability to conjugate proper tenses, grammar, or vocabulary. Additionally, they recognised that memory strategies like structured reviews ("exam practices") could potentially help them score better. Despite this, they seem reluctant

in changing their strategies, seemingly due to a perception that test preparation conflicts with authentic language learning.

What this means in terms of washback is complex. On one hand, this kind of deliberate consideration is in line with what others (e.g., Saglam & Farhady, 2019) have observed in learners' choice of strategy when preparing for English proficiency tests – that they tend to be aware of the type of practice which are test-oriented. On the other hand, considering that high and various usage of LLS is a reliable predictor of language learning success (Peacock & Ho, 2003; Feng et al., 2019) and is desirable, avoiding or neglecting the value or certain strategies would constitute negative washback.

These results suggest that the participants are aware of the intentions to promote washback, but consciously resist it due to doubt over the test's authenticity. This interpretation is supported by the participants' responses that they are unlikely to change the way that they study English despite knowing the disadvantage they might face in high stakes examination. They also expressed a desire to study English in a way that is not exam-focused, while some go further and said that the examination syllabus actively hindered their real study of English. Booth (2018) also reflected on similar sentiments in which students expressed that high stakes testing causes a loss of enjoyment in studying English. In such a case, the aims of the HKEAA to encourage more learner autonomy through LLS education might only be limitedly achieved.

There is a lack of references to textbooks and school-based materials as language-learning resources unless examinations are specifically mentioned. This could reflect an attempt to read texts widely and from different sources, which is also a stated aim of the HKDSE's curriculum. On the other hand, it could also reflect a form of examination anxiety felt by the learners, who do not know what to turn to when they wish to improve and therefore rely mostly on interest to guide them. The lack of any key texts and the unseen format of all test materials could have contributed to this.

It is possible that in a culture where examinations play a central role, English learners undergoing high-stakes tests may very well develop the exam savviness to pay lip service to the values promoted by authorities, without necessarily internalizing or agreeing with the values. As it stands, the sentiments present among the participants seems complex mix of positives and negatives – though students read somewhat widely and are aware of the need for a variety of learning strategies, they feel mostly negatively about studying English in the way that is promoted by test items and are frustrated by the demands placed on them by the examination.

Choosing learning strategies

In looking into the second research question of how learners interpret their own learning, it was found that for all learners, how they choose to learn is a highly personal decision. Learners draw heavily on their personal interests, experience, and perceived need for the target language when they decide how to study it. Additionally, there is a resistance to changing these strategies or trying new ones even when they acknowledge the limitations behind their favoured practices. This is not surprising given how intertwined these strategies are with the learners' enjoyment

of the target language, such as through English shows or music. Additionally, as learners seem to mentally picture themselves using English in various situations, they might be more inclined to adopt strategies that help prepare them for these scenarios that they are imagining themselves in.

Since learning strategies are specific actions taken to make learning easier, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations, it is unsurprising that these personal factors play a strong role in their selection. Although there have been extensive studies done regarding strategies used by successful language learners, as well as their teaching implications (Hardan, 2013; Kinoshita, 2003), there could be a deeper look into the factors that cause learners to adopt or abandon certain strategies.

LIMITATIONS

This study was conducted at a small scale that includes 50 participants for the quantitative portions, and six participants for the qualitative section. The number of participants might limit the generalisability of the study. All participants were students who were taught by the researcher at the time of the study. While this did not seem to have affected the responses given by the participants, it would be desirable to conduct a similar study with participants who do not know the researcher to reduce the possibility of bias. Additionally, although this study identified a bias in participants' use of LLS, it does not yet pinpoint the exact aspects of high stakes testing that might have caused them to exhibit this behaviour. Other factors, such as the students' proficiency and self-image as a language learner, could also have contributed to their choice of LLS (Magogwe & Oliver, 2007). This is due to washback's complexity as a phenomenon, with many mediating factors such as beliefs, experiences, social status, and others which all contribute to its effects. Finally, the emergence of many self-access language learning resources on the internet only became clear during the interview, which possibly shows that the SILL as a research tool might not sufficiently capture more modern styles of language learning.

CONCLUSIONS

Although the examination system may have made learners more aware of the need to diversify their strategies, they also expressed frustration that high stakes examination conflicted with their efforts to study English in a manner that they considered valuable. Learners showed significant bias in their use of language learning strategies, which suggests that more needs to be done if promoting LLS use is to be realised as a curriculum aim. Language learning as portrayed by participants of the interview is a highly personal process, which makers of high stakes examination might need to take into consideration if positive washback is to be realised through test design. As emerging socio-cognitive models of validity acknowledge that validation is co-constructed with stakeholders and highlight the importance of test takers' involvement in the process (Chalhoub-Deville & O'Sullivan, 2020), more effort should be made to involve learners in the validation process to develop tests that produce positive social consequences.

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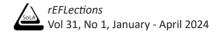*stevenchakmc@gmail.com*

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APPENDIX

SILL questionnaire on language learning styles

Introduction/簡介
This questionnaire collects data on how you study the English Language.

At the end of the questionnaire, you will be invited to attend a short interview to elaborate more on your answers. Participant will be given advice and counselling that may help them study English better in the future.

All information collected is for research and educational purposes only. In case the information is publicised or published, the identity of participants will be anonymised. All information collected will be destroyed after 2 years from the date of collection.

本問卷收集有關您如何學習英語的數據。

在問卷結束時，您將被邀請參加一個簡短的訪談，以詳細說明您的答案。參與者將獲得建議和諮詢，以幫助他們在未來更有效地學習英語。收集的所有信息僅用於研究和教育目的。如果信息被公開或發布，參與者的身份將受到匿名化。所有收集的資料將在收集之日起 2 年後銷毀。

I understand the above information, and know that I can terminate my participation from this study at any time. / 我了解上述信息，並知道我可以隨時終止參與本研究。 *
   • Yes / 是
   • No / 否

In the following section, please answer questions using the following responses (1, 2, 3, 4 or 5) based on how true of YOU the statement is.

1. Never or almost never true of me — means that the statement is very rarely true of me.
2. Usually not true of me — means that the statement is true less than half the time.
3. Somewhat true of me — means that the statement is true of you about half the time.
4. Usually true of me — means that the statement is true more than half the time.
5. Always or almost always true of me — means that the statement is true of you almost always.

在以下部分中，請根據對於自己的真實程度，使用以下答案（1、2、3、4 或 5）回答問題。

1. 從不或幾乎從不——味著該陳述極少適用於我。
2. 通常對不是——意味著該陳述只有不到一半的時間適用於我。
3. 有點真實——意味著該陳述大約一半時間適用於我。
4. 通常是真的——這意味著該陳述有一半時間以上適用於我。
5. 總是或幾乎總是適用——意味著該陳述幾乎總是適用於我。

Section 1

1. I think of relationships between what I already know and new things I learn in English. / 學英文時，我會把新學的東西聯想到已學過的部份。

2. I use new English words in a sentence so I can remember them. / 我用新學的單字造句，以加深記憶。

3. I connect the sound of a new English word and an image or picture of the word to help remember the word. / 我把英文單字的發音與其相關的形象或圖形聯想，以幫助記憶。

4. I remember a new English word by making a mental picture of a situation in which the word might be used. / 我藉著想像使用某個英文字的可能狀況，來記憶那個字。

5. I use rhymes to remember new English words. / 我運用相類似的發音（如：押韻）來記憶英文生字。

6. I use flashcards to remember new English words. / 我使用單字卡來背英文生字。

7. I physically act out new English words. / 我用身體演繹新的英語單詞。

8. I review English lessons often. / 我會複習英文功課。

9. I remember new English words or phrases by remembering their location on the page, on the board, or on a street sign. / 我靠英文單字或片語出現在書上，黑板上，或標誌上的位置來記憶。

Section 2

10. I say or write new English words several times. / 我會反覆練習說或寫英文生字。

11. I try to talk like native English speakers. / 我嘗試說得像以英語為母語的人一樣。

12. I practice the sounds of English. / 我練習英語發音。

13. I use the English words I know in different ways. / 我以不同的方式練習我所學的英文。

14. I start conversations in English. / 我嘗試以英語交談。

15. I watch English language TV shows spoken in English or go to movies spoken in English. / 我看英語發音的電視節目或電影，或收聽英語廣播。

16. I read for pleasure in English. / 我閱讀英文書刊以自娛。

17. I write notes, messages, letters, or reports in English. / 我用英文寫筆記、書信、或報告。

18. I first skim an English passage (read over the passage quickly) then go back and read carefully. / 我先略讀一篇英文文章（快速通讀），然後回去仔細閱讀。

19. I look for words in my own language that are similar to new words in English. / 我在自己的母語中尋找與英語中的新詞相似的詞。

20. I try to find patterns in English. / 我試著找出英語中的規律和句型。

21. I find the meaning of an English word by dividing it into parts that I understand. / 我把一個英文生字分解成幾個我認得的部份（如字首或字根），以找出它的意義。

22. I try not to translate word-for-word. / 在英語會話或閱讀英文時，我避免逐字翻譯。

23. I make summaries of information that I hear or read in English. / 我將我所聽到的和讀到的英文作成摘要筆記。

Section 3

24. To understand unfamiliar English words, I make guesses. / 我遇到不熟悉的英文字時，我會猜一猜它的意思。

25. When I can't think of a word during a conversation in English, I use gestures. / 在英語會話中，若我想不起某個字，我會使用手勢或動作來表達。

26. I make up new words if I do not know the right ones in English. / 當我不知道適切的英文字時，我會自己造字來表達（如用airball 來表達汽球balloon）。

27. I read English without looking up every new word. / 在閱讀英文時，我不會每個字都去查字典。

28. I try to guess what the other person will say next in English. / 我會去猜測別人下一句要說的英文。

29. If I can't think of an English word, I use a word or phrase that means the same thing. / 當我想不出某個英文字時，我會使用意義相通的字或詞。

Section 4

30. I try to find as many ways as I can to use my English. / 我會找各種方式來運用我所學的英文。

31. I notice my English mistakes and use that information to help me do better. / 我會留意自己的英語錯誤，並利用它來改進。

32. I pay attention when someone is speaking English. / 當別人說英語時，我會特別留意聽。

33. I try to find out how to be a better learner of English. / 我試著找出如何學好英語的方式。

34. I plan my schedule so I will have enough time to study English. / 我會訂立作息表，俾使自己有足夠的時間研習英語。

35. I look for people I can talk to in English. / 我會留心尋訪可以用英語交談的對象。

36. I look for opportunities to read as much as possible in English. / 我會尋覓時機多閱讀英文。

37. I have clear goals for improving my English skills. / 我有明確的目標，改進我的英語技能。

38. I think about my progress in learning English. / 我會考量自己學習英語的進展。

Section 5

39. I try to relax whenever I feel afraid of using English. / 每當我感到害怕使用英語時，我會設法使自己心情放鬆。

40. I encourage myself to speak English even when I am afraid of making a mistake. / 即使畏懼犯錯，我仍會鼓勵自己說英語。

41. I give myself a reward or treat when I do well in English. / 每當我的英語表現良好，我會獎勵自己。

42. I notice if I am tense or nervous when I am studying or using English. / 當我讀英文或說英語的時候，我會注意自己是否緊張。

43. I write down my feelings in a language learning diary. / 我會將我的感覺記錄在日記上。

44. I talk to someone else about how I feel when I am learning English. / 我會和別人討論自己學英語的感受。

Section 6

45. If I do not understand something in English, I ask the other person to slow down or say it again. / 假如在英語會話中，我有聽不懂的地方，我會要求對方說慢一點或重說一遍。

46. I ask English speakers to correct me when I talk. / 說英語時，我會要求對方改正我的錯誤。

47. I practice English with other students. / 我會與其他同學練習英文。

48. I ask for help from English speakers. / 我會向講英文的人請求幫助。

49. I ask questions in English. / 我會以英文發問。

50. I try to learn about the culture of English speakers. / 我試著學習英語國家的文化。