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Washback of English Exit Exam (EEE) on Thai University Students' English Language Learning

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Article information	
Abstract	Washback refers to the impact of a test on instruction and learning, with high-stakes tests exerting both positive and negative effects. This study examined the washback of an English exit exam (EEE) on English language learning at a Thai university where English-medium instruction is used in most academic disciplines. The EEE is an in-house standardized test and serves as a graduation requirement for all undergraduate students at this institution. This study employed a mixed-methods research design, collecting quantitative data from 42 students via a questionnaire and qualitative data from nine students via semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed both positive and negative washback effects. Despite awareness of the EEE policy, students perceived the test as lacking validity and reliability due to a disconnect between the learning content and the test constructs, leading to the adoption of more mechanical, rather than communicative, learning strategies. Additionally, their perception of misalignment between EEE results and their actual proficiency contributed to negative washback. However, some positive washback was observed in students' development of intrinsic motivation driven by their curiosity and eagerness to improve their English skills during exam preparation. The study provides unique insights

1. Introduction

"Washback" (Alderson & Wall, 1993; Buck, 1998), interchangeably called "backwash" (Biggs, 1995, 1996; Hughes, 1993), refers to the influence of tests on teaching and learning. It encompasses the way teachers and students prepare for tests. For instance, washback can shape how teachers and students engage in developing skills, utilizing various teaching and learning methods and practices to enhance students' language acquisition, enabling them to perform well in tests. Such washback can bring about positive effects on learning. However, students' anxiety may make them respond to tests by focusing on non-communicative test preparation, such as cramming or practicing test-taking strategies, which can be considered negative washback as it fails to promote genuine language proficiency.

The stakes of an exam play an important role in washback. High-stakes tests have serious implications and consequences for decision-making about the lives of those involved. For example, TOEFL is a high-stakes test as its scores are used to determine admissions (Brown & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015). The higher the stakes of the exam, the stronger the washback effect will be. A previous study found that students spent more time and effort practicing the language skills covered in high-stakes or high-status tests than they did for lower-stakes or lower-status tests (Pan, 2014).

The English exit examination, required for graduation in Thailand, is considered a high-stakes test that measures undergraduates' academic quality

and English proficiency, demonstrating their readiness in the English language to meet the demands of both domestic and international job markets. Since 2016, the Ministry of Education has mandated this exam as part of educational reforms to align undergraduate proficiency with international standards (Office of Higher Education Commission [OHEC], 2016). However, the exam practices vary across universities in Thailand, including the use of in-house tests, international standardized tests (e.g., TOEFL, IELTS), or other accepted tests. Benchmarks also differ, with passing scores ranging from 40% to 60% and varying criteria from pass/fail criteria to acceptance of international test scores. Additionally, each university adopts different strategies to support students who fail the exam, such as allowing retakes or offering tutorial courses where passing the courses is equivalent to passing the exit test (Wudthayagorn, 2021).

At the university under study, an English-medium instruction (EMI) policy is enforced, and the English exit exam (EEE) has been implemented since 2002, the year of the first batch of students' graduation (Mae Fah Luang University, 2003, 2018). Although the EEE has not been explicitly designed to assess the impact of the EMI policy, it is viewed as an indicator of its effects. However, no empirical study has examined the EEE's influence on students' English learning outcomes. While students are directly affected by the tests, research on such effects on students themselves is limited. This study aimed to explore the EEE washback on students' perception, English learning, attitudes, motivation, and proficiency development, addressing the following research questions:

1. How do the students perceive the EEE policy?

2. What are the students' learning experiences and strategies in preparing for the EEE?

3. What are the students' attitudes and motivation toward the EEE?

2. Literature Review

In language teaching, exam washback refers to the effects of testing on teaching and learning (Brown, 1997). Additionally, washback influences curriculum

design, course content, and class time allocation (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Bailey, 1996). Washback can be positive or negative. Positive washback encourages changes in teaching and learning that improve students' language performance. Negative washback, however, narrows the curriculum to test preparation, neglecting development of students' critical thinking and real-world skills. It may also dominate class time, with extra sessions dedicated to review, prioritizing scores over practical skills. The degree of washback, whether strong or weak, is also important. Pan's (2014) study on standardized exit tests highlights the variability of washback on students, revealing different effects of exit exams across groups based on factors such as students' year of study, proficiency levels, and perspectives on the tests.

2.1 Factors Affecting Washback Effect

Based on a review of previous studies (Alderson & Hamp-Lyons, 1996; Gates, 1995), Brown (1997) summarized four main factors affecting the types (positive vs. negative) and amount or intensity (strong vs. weak) of washback: test prestige, test characteristics, people factors, and curriculum factors.

Test prestige, including test status, subject matter, and perceived importance of the test, makes teachers and students prioritize test preparation. Test characteristics such as nature, format, skills tested, utility, and practicality influence how teaching and learning are structured. Specific test formats influence specific behaviors and types of washback. For example, Jianrattanapong (2011) has found that multiple-choice writing tests exert negative washback while direct writing tests promote positive washback by encouraging writing practice. People factors, including perceptions, anxiety, and pressure from students, parents, and teachers, influence teaching adjustments to meet the test requirements. Anxiety reflects negative washback, while positive washback motivates learning. Lastly, curriculum factors involve the test's impact on planning, content, teaching methods, classroom activities, and time allocation. Positive washback leads to a

comprehensive curriculum that promotes relevant learning outcomes, while negative washback narrows focus to test preparation.

The first three factors of test prestige, test characteristics, and people factors directly affect learning. Test prestige and characteristics shape how students perceive the test, either as a motivational tool or a source of pressure, affecting their behavior, motivation, and learning efforts. Previous washback studies have examined these factors, including the status and stakes of tests on teaching, learning, policy decisions on test use (Pan, 2008), teachers' and learners' perceptions, teaching practices, teaching content, methods and materials, learners' learning motivation, and behavior (Athiworakun & Adunyarittigun, 2022; Dong & Liu, 2022; Kuang, 2020; Moradi, 2019), as well as the impacts on curriculum planning (Ramezaney, 2014) and test difficulty, components, weighting, and format (Jianrattanapong, 2011; Tsang & Isaacs, 2022; Xie, 2015). Studies on factors and washback of exams aim to ensure understanding, reduce negative washback, and maximize positive washback to enhance learning development.

2.2 Previous Studies Relating to Washback Effects on Learning

Both positive and negative washback effects have been identified in existing research as resulting from certain elements. Studies have examined the positive washback effects of tests, which influence students' emotions, perceptions, and attitudes, as well as their motivation toward language learning. The findings indicate that favorable perceptions of the test, such as its use and design (Xie & Andrews, 2013), validity and reliability (Xie, 2015), as well as its impact and importance (Dong, 2020), are associated with an increase in positive washback.

Regarding negative washback effects, Xie and Andrews (2013) found that participants who performed poorly tended to spend more time and resources on test preparation. This suggests the negative effect that lower test scores have on students' study habits, leading them to focus only on test-taking strategies. Similarly, the findings of Xie's study (2015) have indicated that test-takers relied

heavily on several test-preparation strategies, including test-taking rehearsal, drilling, and cramming, rather than on strategies aimed at improving their overall language skills. Additionally, Rahman et al. (2021) examined washback of the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) English examination on English teaching-learning practice at secondary schools in Bangladesh and found a strong negative washback on English teaching and learning practices due to a lack of congruence between the objectives of the curriculum and the format of the tests, teachers' insufficient understanding about the curriculum and assessment system, negative attitudes toward the test, and pressure from the schools and the parents to secure good exam grades. An unintended washback effect was also found in Jianrattanapong's (2011) study in Thailand where strong negative washback effects have been observed from an indirect measurement of a writing test.

Di Gennaro (2017) and Nguyen (2023) similarly found both positive and negative washback effects of the exit exam on students' learning. Di Gennaro's study on South Korean students revealed that the exam caused stress, particularly for those with low English proficiency who relied heavily on teachers for preparation and viewed the exam as important for short-term goals like graduation, instead of long-term education or career development. Likewise, Nguyen's study conducted with Vietnamese students found that the IELTS exam caused anxiety rather than motivating learning. While students acknowledged its importance for graduation and job opportunities, the test's difficulty hindered their learning. Both studies have suggested that while exit exams are viewed as essential for academic progress, their stress-inducing nature and difficulty limit their ability to motivate students to improve their English skills.

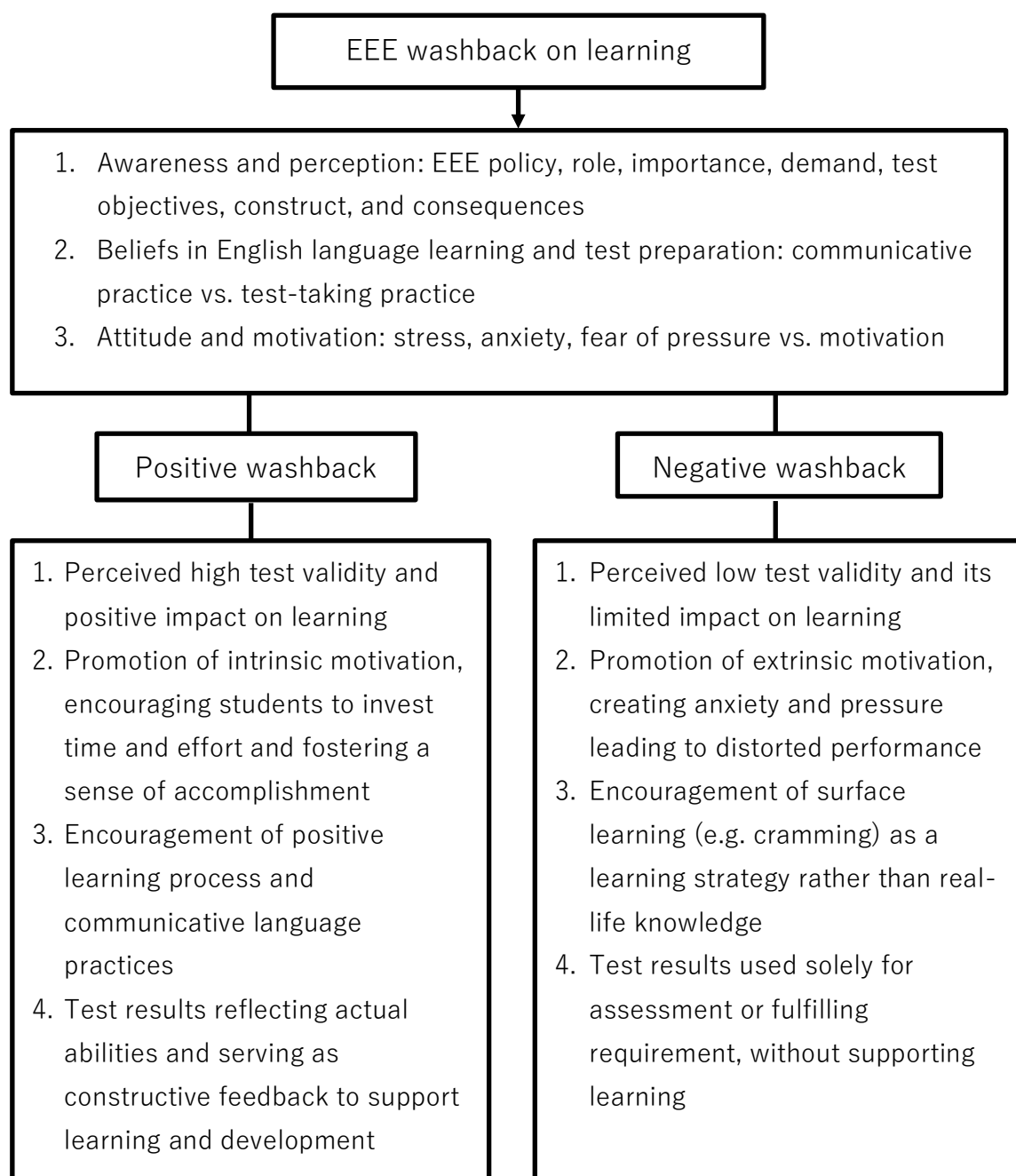The aforementioned studies have provided insights into several challenges for the English exit exam in Thai higher education. First, high-stakes exams cause significant stress and anxiety rather than motivation in learning, particularly if they are too difficult. While test utility can encourage deeper learning, exam difficulty tends to restrict students' learning and lead them to focus on test-taking strategies

to meet their short-term goal of graduation. In addition, misalignment between exam format and curriculum objectives can hinder learning. Washback effects also vary by proficiency level and year of study. Given the overall English proficiency of Thai students, mastering the exam can be both a threat and a challenge. Therefore, the design and implementation of the English exit exam in Thailand should such these challenges.

Existing washback research primarily focuses on investigating the impacts of standardized or high-stakes tests on classroom teaching, including course content, teaching materials, teaching activities, and teachers' beliefs. However, the number of empirical studies on the washback effects of exit examinations on Thai students is rather limited. Therefore, the present study aimed at examining the washback effects of the English exit exam (EEE) on university students' English development, specifically their perceptions, learning behaviors, exam preparation, and their attitude and motivation toward the exam.

2.3 Research Framework

This study's washback framework was based on Hughes's Trichotomy Washback Model (1993), Alderson and Wall's Washback Hypothesis (1993), and Bailey's (1996) discussion of factors influencing washback, with a focus being placed on students' awareness, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, motivation, and preparation strategies for the EEE, with factors that could produce positive and negative washback taken into consideration. For the EEE to have positive washback, it must be valid and relevant to students' learning, and what they had learned needed to be assessed. The test should promote meaningful rather than surface learning, such as memorization and test cramming. It should also motivate students to work harder for achievement and serve as a developmental tool to promote intrinsic over extrinsic motivation, focusing on personal growth and achievement rather than external rewards. The research framework is illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1

EEE Washback Framework

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┌─────────────────────────────────────┐
│       EEE washback on learning       │
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1. Awareness and perception: EEE policy, role, importance, demand, test objectives, construct, and consequences
2. Beliefs in English language learning and test preparation: communicative practice vs. test-taking practice
3. Attitude and motivation: stress, anxiety, fear of pressure vs. motivation

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┌──────────────────┐          ┌──────────────────┐
│ Positive washback│          │ Negative washback│
└──────────────────┘          └──────────────────┘
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Positive washback	Negative washback
1. Perceived high test validity and positive impact on learning	1. Perceived low test validity and its limited impact on learning
2. Promotion of intrinsic motivation, encouraging students to invest time and effort and fostering a sense of accomplishment	2. Promotion of extrinsic motivation, creating anxiety and pressure leading to distorted performance
3. Encouragement of positive learning process and communicative language practices	3. Encouragement of surface learning (e.g. cramming) as a learning strategy rather than real-life knowledge
4. Test results reflecting actual abilities and serving as constructive feedback to support learning and development	4. Test results used solely for assessment or fulfilling requirement, without supporting learning

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Methods

This study employed a mixed-methods research design, utilizing both quantitative data to reveal the wide-ranging trend of exam washback and qualitative data to yield deeper insights into the related issues, consistent with

methods in previous washback studies (e.g., Buyukkeles, 2016; Di Gennaro, 2017; Pan & Newfields, 2011; Sukyadi & Mardiani, 2011).

3.2 The English Exit Examination (EEE)

The English exit examination (EEE), developed by English language instructors at the university under study, was designed to align with the B2 level of proficiency in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The EEE aims to assess students' communicative abilities in five modalities: listening, speaking, grammar, writing, and reading. This paper-based test consists of 100 multiple-choice items divided into three parts with corresponding task types, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Structure of the English Exit Examination

Part 1 Listening and speaking	No. of items
1.1 Questions and responses	10
1.2 Conversations	10
1.3 Talks	10
Total	30
Part 2 Grammar and written expressions	**No. of items**
2.1 Error identification	10
2.2 Sentence completion	10
2.3 Text completion	10
Total	30
Part 3 Reading	**No. of items**
4-8 Passages	40

Final-year students are required to complete the EEE to determine their English proficiency before graduation, with a minimum score of 60 out of 100 to pass. Students who fail can retake the exam until they pass, as graduation is not permitted without EEE success. The test is administered in six rounds per

academic year, with two rounds per semester. The EEE results are recorded on a pass/fail (S/U) basis on students' transcripts.

3.3 Research Setting and Participants

At the time of this study, the university offered 16 study programs taught in English, for all subjects except Law and Nursing. Additionally, all students were required to enroll in at least three English courses, one intensive course during the summer session before their first semester and two more during their first year. A few programs required two additional English courses. Most students completed these requirements in their first year and had no further English courses unless they chose them as electives.

The participants in this study were fourth-year students who took the EEE in the first semester of the 2022 academic year. Following the ethics protocol, an invitation and a consent form were sent to the targeted groups via the university email, along with an attached online questionnaire. Forty-two students volunteered to complete the questionnaire, the final item of which asked about their willingness to participate in an interview. Nine students expressed interest and provided contact information for interview appointments. The profiles of the students who responded to the questionnaire are detailed in Table 2, and those who participated in the semi-structured interviews are listed in Table 3.

Table 2

Profiles of the Participants who Completed the Questionnaire

Schools/Disciplines	Frequency (N = 42)	%
Science and Technology		
Medicine	2	4.76
Integrative Medicine	2	4.76
Science	2	4.76
Agro-industry	2	4.76

Schools/Disciplines	Frequency (N = 42)	%
Health Science	4	9.52
Cosmetic Science	1	2.38
Total	13	30.95
Humanities and Social Sciences		
Management	9	21.43
Information Technology	3	7.14
Liberal Arts	8	19.05
Sinology	5	11.90
Law	4	9.52
Total	29	69.05

Table 3

Profiles of the Participants in the Semi-structured Interviews

List of students	No. of English courses enrolled	Schools / Disciplines	Medium of program instruction
Student 1	all	Liberal Arts, English	English
Student 2	3	Law	Thai
Student 3	3	Agro-industry	English
Student 4	3	Management	English
Student 5	3	Information Technology	English
Student 6	3	Agro-industry	English
Student 7	3	Health Science	English
Student 8	4	Sinology	Chinese/English/Thai
Student 9	4	Sinology	Chinese/English/Thai

3.4 Research instruments

This research employed a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews adapted from Di Gennaro (2017). The questionnaire consisted of 38 questions,

incorporating both a checklist and a 4-point rating scale, eliciting students' perception and motivation toward the EEE, their learning experiences, and the strategies they used to prepare for the exam. Although previous washback research employed a 5–8-point scale for reliability (Di Gennaro, 2017; Nemoto & Beglar, 2014; Nguyen, 2023; Polpo, 2021; Ramezaney, 2014; Sumera et al., 2015), the researchers chose a 4-point scale to avoid indecisive responses that could obscure the findings, despite concerns that it might force participants into making definite choices. Østerås et al. (2008) have argued that both 4-point and 5-point scales discriminate similarly well between groups with different levels and between known groups in the population, supporting the researchers' decision. The scales in this study ranged from 1 (Disagree) to 4 (Agree), with 2 representing 'Somewhat Disagree' and 3 representing 'Somewhat Agree.' The questionnaire was distributed online, with responses expected within two weeks. Closed-ended responses were recorded in a spreadsheet and analyzed descriptively (mean scores and standard deviation).

The interview protocol consisted of ten questions, covering the general profiles of the students, their learning activities in English courses, the time and strategies they allocated for preparing for the EEE, their perception of the EEE, their suggestions for improvement, and their additional opinions on the exam. The interviews were conducted via online meetings after the participants completed the questionnaires. The interview data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by categorizing the content into three constructs or themes outlined in the research framework, aligned with the research questions. These themes were: first, students' awareness and perception of EEE policy; second, their beliefs about English language learning, their learning experiences in English courses, and their test preparation strategies, and third, their attitude and motivation toward the EEE. The categorized data were then interpreted to determine whether they aligned with positive or negative washback as defined in the research framework. Examples of verbatim responses for each construct include: "The test is important/relevant for me" and "The test is really difficult" (indicating awareness and perception of the

EEE policy); "I think/don't think tutoring for the EEE is…," "I prepared for the test by…," and "In my English courses, I practiced by…" (indicating beliefs, learning experiences and exam preparation strategies); and "I prefer to/not to take the exam," "Taking the EEE is good for me because…," "and I learned…from the EEE" (indicating attitudes and motivation).

The content validity of both instruments was confirmed by three experts: two specializing in English language teaching and one in language assessment. The experts rated the content of the two instruments in terms of item-objective congruence (IOC) and offered suggestions for improvement, mainly about the clarity and redundancy of the questions. The overall mean scores of the IOC rating of the questionnaire and the interview were 0.99 and 1.00, respectively. The Cronbach's alpha reliability index of the questionnaire was 0.93, which indicated an excellent level of reliability.

4. Findings

The perceived washback effects of the EEE on students' English language development derived from two data sources—questionnaires and interviews—are presented for each research question as follows:

4.1 Students' Perceptions of the EEE Policy

Table 4 illustrates questionnaire data regarding the students' awareness and perceptions of the EEE policy regarding the test objectives, test constructs, the demands of the test, its importance, and its consequences.

Table 4

Students' Perceptions of the Exit Exam Policy

Items	*M*	*SD*	Meaning
1. I was aware of the EEE policy.	3.40	1.04	Somewhat agree
2. I believed that the EEE policy was well-justified.	3.10	1.10	Somewhat agree
3. I was aware of the constructs of the EEE.	3.07	0.95	Somewhat agree

Items	M	SD	Meaning
4. The EEE policy influenced my English language learning.	2.81	1.09	Somewhat disagree
6. The EEE scores were accurate representations of my English ability.	2.86	1.07	Somewhat disagree
13. I was aware of the format and items that appeared on the EEE.	3.21	1.02	Somewhat agree
15. I understood why I had to take the EEE.	3.07	1.09	Somewhat agree
17. The EEE would help me with my future career.	3.07	1.07	Somewhat agree
20. The EEE was a fair test of my English ability.	3.02	1.07	Somewhat agree
30. I was well-informed about the EEE objectives.	3.26	1.04	Somewhat agree
31. I regarded the EEE as a test which could influence my future career.	2.52	1.13	Somewhat disagree
32. To me, the EEE was a fair test.	2.90	1.10	Somewhat disagree
33. The EEE was able to reflect my real English language ability.	2.90	1.01	Somewhat disagree

Note. 1.00-1.99 means "Disagree," 2.00-2.99 means "Somewhat Disagree," 3.00-3.99 means "Somewhat Agree," and 4.00 means "Agree."

The students demonstrated moderate awareness of the EEE policy ($M = 3.40$), objectives ($M = 3.26$), and format ($M = 3.21$). Regarding the EEE policy, the students demonstrated similar awareness of its justification and necessity, with mean scores of 3.10 and 3.07, respectively. However, a majority of the students perceived the impact of the EEE on their English language learning as minimal ($M = 2.81$).

The interview data offered support to the questionnaire findings regarding students' awareness of the EEE policy. However, many students did not know that

they had to take the exam until their third year or final year, and they did not receive information about the exam constructs from the university's official notification, but from their seniors. One student noted being aware of the EEE as a graduation requirement since the first year, though with limited understanding. However, perspectives on the EEE's significance varied based on academic backgrounds. Excerpts 1 and 2 show that an English-major student immersed in EMI classes saw significant overlap between the EEE content and the coursework assessments.

> Excerpt 1: "The EEE is redundant with what I'm studying in my field and seems unnecessary when compared to other universities that don't have an EEE." (Student 1: Liberal Arts, English)

> Excerpt 2: "The test is not important for me because the test is not related to law, and my program is taught in Thai." (Student 2: Law)

Conversely, a law-major student studying in Thai found the EEE irrelevant to her curriculum. The remaining EMI students agreed on the importance of the EEE for academic and professional purposes, as shown in Excerpts 3-4.

> Excerpt 3: "The test is important because I can revamp my knowledge of English Communication 1 and 2 and may use it for my further studies and future career." (Student 3: Agro-industry)

> Excerpt 4: "It's important. Though I major in Chinese, I do need to improve my English language skills as English is a global language." (Student 9: Sinology)

Regarding the test constructs, two students suggested that the test should focus on listening, speaking, and reading, excluding grammar, especially error identification. They found the grammar section too challenging for non-English majors and misaligned with their general English courses. One student added that

the grammar section should emphasize communication rather than discrete grammar points.

In addition, many students found the test's vocabulary overly complex and topic-specific. They attributed this complexity to their unfamiliarity with the terms and the lack of everyday vocabulary, making it difficult for them to comprehend reading texts and respond effectively to listening and speaking sections, as reflected in Excerpts 5-7 below.

> Excerpt 5: "The test was really hard for law students because of many uncommon words." (Student 2: Law)

> Excerpt 6: "The test had many difficult words. I had to guess their meanings from the sentence structure." (Student 1: Liberal Arts, English)

> Excerpt 7: "The vocabulary should have been related to daily life, and not too difficult and too specific for students from all majors." (Student 9: Sinology)

The data from Table 4 indicate a similar level of disagreement among the students regarding the accuracy of the test scores in reflecting their English ability ($M = 2.86$). Similarly, the students somewhat disagreed with the influence of the test on both their English language learning ($M = 2.81$) and their future careers ($M = 2.52$). These findings may raise questions about the test's value in relation to students' educational and professional outcomes. Interview responses further cast doubts on the EEE's effectiveness in assessing test takers' abilities, as evidenced in Excerpts 8-10 below.

> Excerpt 8: "I don't think the exam reflects my ability accurately. If I had more time to prepare, I could have done better." (Student 3: Agro-industry)

Excerpt 9: "I wish I knew the scores I received so that I could pinpoint areas for improvement." (Student 2: Law)

Excerpt 10: I'm not sure whether the test reflects my ability, as the English used in the exam is quite different from how it's used in real life. (Student 4: Management)

Overall, students were aware of the EEE policy, but they did not perceive its importance and relevance to their lives. Besides, they felt that the EEE content and format were problematic and hindered their abilities to demonstrate real language skills.

4.2 Students' Beliefs toward English Language, Learning Experiences, and Test Preparation

To answer Research Question 2, this section describes students' beliefs toward English language learning, their perceptions of the relationship between the EEE and the English curriculum, their experiences with learning activities and learning materials in English classes, and the strategies they used for EEE preparation. The data are presented in Table 5.

Table 5

Students' Beliefs toward English Language Learning, Learning Experiences, and Test Preparation

Items	M	SD	Meaning
Curriculum design and development			
12. The English skills I had learned from the General English courses were related to the EEE.	2.62	1.01	Somewhat disagree
18. The content of the EEE was more important to me than other parts of my English classes.	2.52	1.11	Somewhat disagree

Items	M	SD	Meaning
19. The English courses that I have taken, and the course learning materials helped prepare me for the EEE.	2.67	1.07	Somewhat disagree
21. My instructor provided me with extra materials for the EEE.	1.88	1.04	Disagree
Beliefs, teaching, and learning activities			
35. I believed that the best strategy that helped me succeed in the EEE was tutoring and practicing on the mock test.	2.93	1.11	Somewhat disagree
8. I had taken extra practice for the EEE.	2.67	1.12	Somewhat disagree
9. I studied directly for the items on the EEE outside of the classroom.	2.40	1.15	Somewhat disagree
11. I think that my instructor spent too much time preparing students for the EEE.	2.12	1.11	Somewhat disagree
16. I did activities in English class that were directly related to the EEE.	2.60	1.08	Somewhat disagree
Teaching and learning materials and test preparation			
7. The materials I used to prepare for the EEE are different from the ones I used in English classes.	2.69	1.02	Somewhat disagree
14. My English instructor prepared me adequately for the EEE.	2.14	1.05	Somewhat disagree
23. The textbooks and other supporting materials I used in my English class were appropriate for the requirements of the EEE.	2.55	1.02	Somewhat disagree

Note. 1.00-1.99 means "Disagree," 2.00-2.99 means "Somewhat Disagree," 3.00-3.99 means "Somewhat Agree," and 4.00 means "Agree."

As regards the relation among the English curriculum, the course content, and the EEE, the students disagreed with the statements that their teachers provided extra materials for EEE preparation ($M = 1.88$) and somewhat disagreed that the General English courses and materials helped prepare them for the EEE ($M = 2.67$). In addition, they somewhat disagreed about the relevance of the skills learned to the EEE ($M = 2.62$).

Table 5 further indicates that students somewhat disagreed that tutoring and practicing with mock tests was the most effective strategy for EEE success ($M = 2.93$). However, these findings are inconsistent with the interview responses, where most students shared their preferred EEE preparation strategies, including mock tests and tutoring sessions. Some mentioned using communicative practice, including watching English movies and songs, and conversing with native English speakers as helpful methods for improving their English.

> Excerpt 11: "I prepared with mock exams and also by studying through the subjects in my English program curriculum." (Student 1: Liberal Arts, English)

> Excerpt 12: "I prepared for the exam by studying test books like TOEIC or tutorial worksheets with past exams, enrolling in a tutoring course, and practicing online." (Student 2: Law, Student3: Agro-industry, and Student 5: Information Technology)

Regarding the teaching and learning materials and test preparation, the students somewhat disagreed with the statement that the materials they used to prepare for the EEE were different from the ones they used in English classes ($M = 2.69$). The questionnaire and interview responses aligned, showing that students relied on resources learned in their English courses for EEE preparation.

Excerpt 13: "I practiced English skills through courses in my study program, which helped me with the listening, grammar, and reading sections of the test. (Student 1: Liberal Arts, English)

Excerpt 14: "In class, we practiced listening, speaking, presentation, reading, and writing provided by the teachers. However, I could do better in the EEE speaking test." (Student 3: Agro-industry)

However, they disagreed somewhat that the textbooks and other supporting materials used in their English classes were suitable for the EEE requirements ($M = 2.55$). Additionally, most students disagreed that English instructors adequately prepared them for the EEE ($M = 2.14$).

In conclusion, data from the questionnaire and interviews showed minimal influence of the EEE on the English curriculum, teaching, learning activities, and materials. The students perceived that the EEE did not align with the General English curriculum and that instruction did not directly prepare them for it.

4.3 Students' Attitudes and Motivation toward the EEE

To investigate Research Question 3, this section reports on the students' attitudes and motivation toward the EEE, as they are key indicators of washback. The data are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6

Students' Attitudes and Motivation toward the Exit Exam

Items	*M*	*SD*	Meaning
5. I had an overall positive experience taking the EEE.	2.79	1.12	Somewhat disagree
10. The EEE caused me stress.	2.57	1.25	Somewhat disagree
22. I changed the way I studied English because of the EEE.	2.48	1.06	Somewhat disagree
24. If I could choose, I would prefer not	2.57	1.29	Somewhat disagree

Items	M	SD	Meaning
to take the EEE.			
25. I was afraid of failing the EEE.	2.62	1.25	Somewhat disagree
26. The EEE motivated me to study English harder.	2.69	1.02	Somewhat disagree
27. The preparation for EEE helped me have a better command of English.	2.62	1.03	Somewhat disagree
28. The EEE had little impact on what I learned.	2.57	1.09	Somewhat disagree*
29. I felt pressure from my teachers and other students to improve my EEE scores.	2.38	1.23	Somewhat disagree*
34. The EEE has influenced positive changes in my English language learning.	2.69	0.98	Somewhat disagree

Note. 1.00-1.99 means "Disagree", 2.00-2.99 means "Somewhat Disagree", 3.00-3.99 means "Somewhat Agree", 4.00 means "Agree"

*Reversed Items

As shown in Table 6, students somewhat disagreed with the statements that their experience with the EEE was entirely positive ($M = 2.79$), that the EEE motivated them to study English harder ($M = 2.69$), and that the EEE has influenced positive changes in their English language learning ($M = 2.69$).

The data from the interview revealed the complex relationship between the favorable outcomes of taking the exam and the concerns about its negative consequences.

> Excerpt 15: "The positive aspect of the exam is that it makes me focus more on English, but if I fail, it could impact my graduation." (Student 6: Agro-industry)

In addition, students expressed their opinions that they would rather take the EEE in the third year due to some constraints in their final year, such as internships, extra expenses to return to the university for reexamination, and delayed graduation.

> Excerpt 16: "I propose the university offer more English courses until the third or fourth year to prevent extended breaks and help students retain knowledge for the EEE, or students could take the EEE after completing English for Communication 2, alongside other subjects, to reduce stress." (Student 2: Law)

> Excerpt 17: "The test difficulty should be reduced and adjusted to criteria-based because failing EEE could postpone our graduation." (Student 1: Liberal Arts, English)

Although students questioned the overall impact of the EEE on their motivation and learning, items 28 and 29 in Table 6 indicate that they somewhat disagreed that the EEE had minimal impact on their learning (M = 2.69) and that they felt pressure from teachers or peers to improve their EEE scores (M = 2.69). These findings suggest that they recognized some positive influence from the exam and did not feel significant external pressure from their teachers or peers regarding their EEE scores. The interview data show how the EEE somewhat influenced their learning and their attitudes toward its beneficial impact, as shown in the excerpts below.

> Excerpt 18: "Taking the exam has improved my grammar understanding, and the more exams I take, the better I retain grammar. Failing also helps me address weaknesses for future exams." (Student 3: Agro-industry)

> Excerpt 19: "I gain new knowledge from the reading texts in the test, like sunbeam snakes and homeschooling, and it's a good chance to

review my English while tutoring my friend." (Student 4: Management)

Overall, data from the questionnaire and the interview have demonstrated some divergence and contradiction among the students' responses, which indicated both negative and positive washback effects of the EEE on students' attitudes and motivation in learning.

5. Discussion

The findings can be discussed in two aspects: (1) the washback effects of the EEE on students' attitudes and motivation toward the exit exam, and (2) students' learning strategies and preparation for the exam.

5.1 Students' Motivation toward the English Exit Exam

Despite awareness of the EEE policy, students saw little connection between the English curriculum and the EEE content. They did not view the EEE as a true reflection of their abilities or beneficial for their future, leading to ambiguous motivation. The lack of anxiety, due to the EEE being offered six times a year with retakes, could reduce their intrinsic motivation. As Dong and Liu (2022) have noted, positive test perception, such as test validity and impact, fosters intrinsic motivation toward communicative learning. Without these perceptions, the students in the present study were likely to focus on passing the EEE only to meet the graduation requirement.

The study also revealed concerns about the test's vocabulary difficulty, which was challenging for both EMI and non-EMI students. In fact, excessive difficulty, especially when unrelated to their disciplines or real life, can demotivate students. As Shih (2007) has emphasized, test difficulty is a key motivational factor and overly challenging exams can discourage learning. Furthermore, the objective test format that indirectly assessed speaking and writing was seen as disconnected from real-life language use, thus limiting meaningful learning. Some

students felt they would perform better with the EEE directly assessed productive skills. Thus, this format of the EEE poses a washback risk, as pointed out by Taylor (2005) that test content that is inconsistent with communicative language learning can lead to negative washback. Although the EEE has to accommodate a large number of students, alternative approaches balancing direct and indirect assessment could be explored. The EEE stakeholders should consider more effective methods beyond objective formats to achieve best practices.

The qualitative findings from the interviews revealed that a few students gained new knowledge from the EEE reading section, as they were able to recall some vocabulary from the exam and they subsequently looked up the meaning of those words out of curiosity. Furthermore, some students used failure as motivation to review grammar for retaking the exam. These responses suggested a potential positive washback, with the EEE motivating students to persist and invest in their learning, fostering intrinsic motivation. Such a finding somewhat aligned with the findings reported in Sirisukeepradit and Yippikun's (2024) study that nursing students exhibited both integrative and instrumental motivation, enjoying learning English while also recognizing its importance for career advancement.

Another source of negative washback was the pass/fail result format, which lacked feedback on students' strengths and weaknesses. This limited the students' ability to improve. This led them to focus on only on test outcomes rather than on use of the EEE results to improve their learning. If score reporting was incorporated into the EEE's policy, it may serve as a motivational tool to promote beneficial washback, as stressed by Bailey (1996).

To enhance intrinsic motivation, EEE administrators could increase the exam's relevance to students' academic goals and careers, making it more than just a graduation requirement. Exam writers should also design exam content that aligns with students' needs and interests, with an appropriate level of difficulty, so

that the exam could foster engagement and reflection, which in turn can promote students' learning and motivation.

5.2 Students' Learning Strategies and Preparation for the English Exit Exam

Similar to Pan (2014), students in the present study, despite being skeptical about tutoring for the EEE, preferred traditional test preparation methods such as self-study of practice exercises and tutorial sessions with freelance tutors. This contradiction may have stemmed from the test format, which prioritizes test practice over developing communicative skills, particularly in grammar error identification. An objective test format can lead to negative washback as it focuses on discrete points rather than language development, as Jianrattanapong (2011) has found with indirect assessment, thereby hindering positive washback.

Moreover, it was found that students' awareness and perceptions of the EEE policy influenced their washback experience. According to Polpo (2021), understanding test goals allows students to tailor their study strategies and test preparation methods. In this study, students were only informed about the EEE policy, format, and content in their final year, just before the exam. This led to their heavy reliance on test preparation, focusing on mechanical practice tests rather than broader English language skills, reflecting a negative washback effect. In this study the students seemed to concentrate more on test-specific tasks, such as error identification exercises and multiple-choice strategies, while neglecting holistic language development. This finding was in congruence with Robb and Ercanbrack's (1999) finding that students often focused on specific test items likely to appear on the test. Furthermore, the study finding yielded support to the finding of Naujoks et al. (2022) that the gap between learning and assessment could lead to cramming. To promote positive washback, the university should offer curricular or extracurricular activities that maintain students' engagement with English until they have to take the EEE. Also, informing students of the

specifications of the EEE in advance and encouraging diverse learning strategies could also foster positive washback among the students.

It is worth noting that using test-taking strategies for preparation is not entirely disadvantageous. As Robb and Ercanbrack (1999) have suggested, preparatory materials can benefit reading comprehension, particularly for non-English majors with low achievement. Students may encounter new content in these materials, which, although not part of their curriculum, could spark their interest. Damankesh and Babaii (2015) also point out that test-taking strategies like using grammar clues can enhance students' cognition and attention, promoting reasoning and intellectual thinking through intelligent guessing.

Positive washback was also apparent in the students' responses regarding their classroom learning experiences. Despite noting a disconnect between classroom content and the EEE, they revealed a communicative learning approach, with assessment focusing on direct measures such as presentations and writing tasks. This suggested that their teachers did not focus specifically on EEE preparation. Positive washback supports a comprehensive curriculum rather than narrowing the course content to test-specific materials.

Based on the findings of the present study, it is recommended that the EEE be redesigned with a communicative focus to encourage students to adopt communicative learning strategies. Moreover, the students should receive detailed EEE results that reflect their actual strengths and weaknesses, rather than only letter grades. Such results should include a meaningful description of skills achieved and areas for improvement as high-stakes exams should influence teaching and learning practices (Luxia, 2005), and without informative feedback, the disconnect between instruction and assessment will undermine the washback effects of the EEE.

6. Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

Although this study investigated perceptions and practices of students across various academic disciplines, the small sample size may have affected the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the students who took part in this study varied in English proficiency, and this could have influenced their perceptions, experiences, learning strategies, attitudes, and motivation toward the EEE. Future research could benefit from categorizing students by their English proficiency levels to explore whether and how different levels of proficiency results in different perspectives. Furthermore, factors like the cost of education and socio-economic background, which may influence washback, should also be considered in future studies. Lastly, some students in this study expressed concerns about the fairness of the EEE regarding its content and difficulty, so test fairness warrants further investigation in future research.

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10. Appendix

Sample Questions from the Questionnaires Used in This Study

Objectives	Items	Rating			
		1	2	3	4
To identify the students' awareness of the policy of the test	1. I am well aware of the EEE policy. ฉันทราบดีเกี่ยวกับนโยบายการสอบ Exit Exam วิชาภาษาอังกฤษ				
To examine the compatibility between students' beliefs and the demands of the test	2. I believe that the EEE policy is well-justified. ฉันเชื่อว่านโยบายการสอบ การสอบ Exit Exam วิชาภาษาอังกฤษเป็น นโยบายที่มีเหตุผลสมควร				
To identify the students' awareness of the construct of the test	3. I am aware of the constructs of the EEE. ฉันทราบดีเกี่ยวกับโครงสร้าง/ องค์ประกอบของข้อสอบ Exit Exam วิชาภาษาอังกฤษ				
To examine the compatibility between students' beliefs and the demands of the test	4. EEE policy influences my English language learning. การจัดสอบ Exit Exam วิชา ภาษาอังกฤษ มีผลต่อการเรียน ภาษาอังกฤษของฉัน				
Identify students' attitudes toward the test	5. I have an overall positive experience taking EEE tests ฉันมีประสบการณ์ที่ดีเกี่ยวกับการ สอบ Exit Exam วิชาภาษาอังกฤษ				