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A critical literature review on the washback effect of task-based vocabulary assessment on Iranian EFL learners

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The present critical literature review explored the previous research articles to find out the washback effect of task-based assessment (TBA) of vocabulary on EFL learners. While the diversity of teaching and testing methods within today's EFL classrooms continues to increase, it is better to pay attention to alternative methods of assessment like task-based vocabulary assessments in contrast to traditional assessment. Despite the existence of many research articles in the field of alternative teaching and assessment methods, Iran's education system has not pay attention to finding an alternative method of assessment that can replace it with its own current unsuccessful traditional method. Therefore, the present paper critically evaluated the previous research articles about the washback effect of TBA of vocabulary on EFL learners. The fundamental motivation for writing the current paper is that Iran's public EFL program suffers from traditional assessment issues. To address these challenges, Iran's assessment system must be changed by employing alternative types of assessment and establishing a teacher assistance program. The first focus of the present paper was to review task-based language teaching (TBLT), task-based language assessment (TBLA), and washback effect definitions. Second, the role of vocabulary in TBLT and TBLA was explained. Next, an overview of the empirical studies on TBLT, TBLA, the washback effect, and vocabulary assessment in international and Iranian contexts was presented. Finally, the research question about the washback effects of task-based vocabulary assessment on EFL learners' vocabulary learning was answered based on the critical review of the previous empirical research.

KEYWORDS

task, task-based language teaching (TBLT), task-based language assessment (TBLA), assessment, washback effect, vocabulary

Introduction

In the 1970s, there was considerable effort to promote second or foreign language learning through the communicative approach (Oxford et al., 1989). As a result, a range of instructional activities gained prominence that emphasized the need for learners to focus on meaning and communicate information to one another (Long, 2016). At this stage, it seems to have been assumed that we should not only focus on language structure but that it was also necessary to develop the ability to express meanings (Widdowson, 1978). As a result, the concepts of task-based pedagogical developments were prevalent and influenced syllabus designers and assessment experts. Moreover, the use of task-based approaches was introduced by Prabhu in 1987, and after that, Long and Crookes' (1992) and Skehan's (1998) contributions since the early 1990s have made them three of the most important researchers in the field of TBLT. TBLT can help researchers understand the differences between learners' actual language ability and how they use this ability for practical communicative frameworks (Long and Crookes, 1992; Skehan, 1998).

Additionally, the concept of the washback effect has been one of the greatest concerns for researchers in the field of language testing as an effect of testing on learning and teaching, and ample investigations have been done in this area (e.g., Buck, 1988; Alderson and Wall, 1993; Bailey, 1996; Damankesh and Babaii, 2015). However, while the L2 literature includes numerous investigations of TBLT and TBLA (Kafipour et al., 2018), the number of the studies which explored the washback effect of teacher-designed task-based tests on EFL learners is scarce.

Like the other elements in the present critical literature review, vocabulary is also a fundamental element in learning a foreign or second language. Krashen (1989) believes that a large vocabulary is essential for the mastery of a language and in agreement with him, Wilkins (1972) states that without vocabulary, nothing can be taught. In this paper, Webb and Nation's (2017) definition of vocabulary learning was adopted, in which vocabulary learning "has been a key part of English education" (p. 7). Vocabulary knowledge is one of the most important skills, which contributes to a better understanding of speaking, reading, listening, and writing (Milton, 2013). According to Nation (2019), Knowledge of vocabulary entitles different levels of strength, detail, and fluency. Teachers are interested to develop Students' knowledge of vocabulary by making a balance in their language teaching methods. Additionally, he points out that it is not important to be knowledgeable about all aspects of knowledge since their importance is varying. Breath, depth, and fluency are three of the most important aspects of word knowledge we should pay attention to (p. 15).

Consequently, all of the factors stated above were carefully explored in the following sections of this literature review to

achieve the main goal of present literature review, which is to clarify the washback effect of task-based vocabulary assessment on EFL learners. The next sections of the present paper are about the theoretical backgrounds of TBLT, TBLA, the washback effect, and the role of vocabulary in TBLT and TBLA. Finally, the empirical studies on TBLT, TBLA, the washback effect, and the vocabulary assessment in international and Iranian contexts are reviewed. Following a critical evaluation of prior research publications in international and Iranian contexts, which included assessing and evaluating the benefits and drawbacks of task-based vocabulary teaching and the washback effect of TBA, the research question of the present study was answered which is: How does the washback effect of task-based vocabulary assessment influence EFL learners?

Statement of the problem

It is important to emphasize the significance of assessment in language teaching and learning. In Iranian schools, traditional and explicit teaching methods have been employed and teachers assess students using the same educational content that they presented, in the form of traditional assessment tools, such as multiple-choice tests, true or false tests, short answers, and essays. Traditional assessment method has not been always an effective way of assessment and one of the important aspects of foreign language education, which seems to receive not much attention in the Iranian educational system, is the washback effect of alternative assessments. Many previous research articles explored the positive washback effect of TBA as one of the effective kinds of alternative assessment on EFL learners. The present paper aimed to review some of these previous articles, which compared task-based and traditional assessments for enhancing and developing vocabulary learning of the participants. Some studies examined the effects of task-based teaching and assessment on essential skills including listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary (Buck, 1988; Chapman and Snyder, 2000; Kafipour et al., 2018; Ali and Hamid, 2020; Elahi and Mashhadi Heidar, 2021). The importance of the previous article and the results obtained have caused the current literature review to critically deal with the state of assessment in Iranian schools. Therefore, the critical evaluation of past research findings which is mentioned in the present paper may contribute to the re-thinking and re-designing of vocabulary courses in the curriculum renewal process, and will encourage teachers to use TBAs in the classroom. Moreover, the Iranian education system will benefit the most from changes in assessment methods since by considering an alternative method of assessment like TBA and training the teachers to use it, Students' knowledge will improve. Using alternative types of assessment in the educational system of Iran is an important issue in the teaching and learning process, the aim of which is to bring about refinement and

improvement for the teachers and the students in EFL teaching and learning.

The theoretical background of task-based language teaching

In the early 1980s, the term “task” became popular in applied linguistics. It is now a commonly utilized notion in both the design of second language curriculum content and research on second language learning (SLA).

In the task-based language learning and teaching approach, the dictionary definition of the term “task” stated that, “the task is an activity which is designed to help achieve a particular learning goal” (Richards and Schmidt, 2013, p. 584). As this definition implies, language learners use the authentic target language to fulfill an activity such as addressing an issue, putting something together, carrying out an interview, etc.

This is what is meant by the task in Prabhu’s (1987) definition in his Bangalore language-teaching project that tasks are a good fit for communicative language instruction because they enhance realistic learning and promote normal language development, especially when combined with a group activity.

Moreover, the other important key term is task-based language teaching (TBLT), which is defined as “a teaching approach based on the use of communicative and interactive tasks as the central units for the planning and delivery of instruction” (Richards and Schmidt, 2013, p. 585). These tasks require productive conversation, interaction, and discussion, which help students to acquire needed skills in grammar through authentic language use (Richards and Schmidt, 2013). In this paper, the author adopted the dictionary definition of TBLT, Prabhu’s (1987) and Skehan’s (2003) definitions.

Based on Skehan (1998), Language learners should consider a task as an activity, which has a connection to real-world activities, during which the major focus is on meaning, and they should address a communication problem. He also stated that after completing the task, it will be evaluated in terms of outcome. In addition, he mentioned that task-based language learning is a subcategory of communicative language learning, and language teachers adopted the task-based language learning method to enhance the communicative language ability of the learners. Some instructors used the task-based syllabus to develop learners’ capacity for expressing meaning (Skehan, 2003).

In line with Skehan’s (2003) statement, Ellis (2003) also mentioned that instructors used language in the classroom for enhancing learners’ communication ability in a real-life situations, rather than classroom activities.

In conclusion, according to Richards and Renandya’s (2002) definition, for EFL learners, TBLT is an educational framework and an approach for second or foreign language learning, and for teachers is a teaching methodology in which teachers

consider the classroom tasks as the main focus, which is goal-oriented and mainly focused on content. In other words, TBLT is not focused on grammar or vocabulary but tries to facilitate second language acquisition (SLA) in which the instructors expect to see real-life language use at the end of the instruction.

The theoretical background of task-based language assessment

Classroom assessment is defined as “a systematic approach to collecting information and making inferences about the ability of a student or the quality or success of a teaching course” (Richards and Schmidt, 2013, p. 35). Moreover, based on Richards and Schmidt (2013), “assessment may be done by test, interview, questionnaire, observation, etc.” (p. 35). In this paper, the author adopted this definition of assessment because it is widely used and accepted by previous research studies on classroom assessment.

After establishing what is exactly meant by assessment, a special kind of assessment which is task-based assessment (TBA), should be defined. According to Brindley (1994), TBA is the process of evaluating a set of specified criteria. He stated that the strength of the communicative performances is related to the learners engaging in a meaning-focused activity that has a goal. In this paper, the author uses Brindley’s definition of TBA, which is in line with Fenton’s (1996) and many other researchers’ definitions in the area of TBA. Along these lines, Fenton (1996) mentioned that the task-based items used in the assessment lead to a collection of useful details about the communicative competence of the testee, and authentic language utilization will be useful for the test taker’s decisions. Moreover, TBA is elaborated more in the literature review with different definitions. For defining the “TBA” concept, Brindley’s (1994) pioneer definition is used and adopted by the author.

TBLA emerged as a reaction against the current traditional classroom assessment, which is a new trend generally which are used, as a motivator to encourage student involvement in their assessment, their interaction with other students, teachers, parents, and the larger sometimes real community (Aschbacher, 1994). In other words, the authentic tasks are utilized to assess what a learner can do with language in a real or semi-real world, and these tasks are designed to assess the behavior of learners in a natural world (Ellis, 2017). TBLA is derived from the fact that learning grammar and vocabulary is not enough for using a language fluently and to achieve goals in contemporary societies. To use language for the aim of testing, the test-taker, besides knowing formal elements of language, should know about topical, social, and pragmatic knowledge as well (Norris, 2016).

As a framework for language assessment in the foreign language learning process, TBLA utilizes the task as the essential unit, and it is based on the same underlying principles

as TBLT, but enlarges it from the learning-and-teaching domain to the testing domain (Bachman, 2002; Ellis, 2003). Same as in TBLT methodology, assessment in TBLA is also formed around tasks rather than exclusively learning grammar and vocabulary, and TBLA is trying to make a connection between the learner's performance during the test and the performance of the learner in the real world (Brindley, 1994). Assessment tasks are like "meaning-focused devices for eliciting and evaluating learners' communicative performances during language usage and they are designed for a specific goal" (Shehadeh, 2012, p. 157).

In conclusion, the definition of TBA is different among teachers, researchers, and testers, especially relying on the specific aims of assessment within researchers' distinguished educational contexts (Brown, 2004; Brindley, 2013). TBA is not a new trend in the field of language pedagogy. In recent years, based on the goals of curriculum designers which are about extending the ability of the learners for using language appropriately and effectively in educationally or professionally important language use settings, TBLA is integrated into communicative and learner-centered language teaching programs and also in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) programs (Long, 2014; Thomas, 2015; Benson, 2016).

The theoretical background of washback

Washback, also known as backwash in testing and assessment is "the positive or negative effects of a test on classroom teaching or learning" (Richards and Schmidt, 2013, p. 634). According to Messick (1996), the introduction or use of a test to promote language learning sometimes leads teachers and students to learn the material in a different way they would not otherwise choose. In this regard, he referred to the washback concept as the consequential validity, which has various influences inside and outside the classroom and includes the effects of tests on language learners and teachers, policy-makers, and syllabus designers. In this paper, along with the dictionary definition of washback, the pioneer definition of Messick (1996) is adopted.

In recent years, washback has received many researchers' attention worldwide while studying the effects of assessment and testing on learning and teaching a foreign language (Martel, 2019; Ha, 2020; Kamalia Hakim and Srisudarso, 2020; Palupiningsih and Kusumastiti, 2020; Pitoyo et al., 2020; Salma and Prastikawati, 2021).

To understand the meaning of washback, the distinctions between the terms impact and effect should be mentioned. The term impact is used to imply the influence of an assessment along with power, while the word effect is used to imply the result and outcome of an assessment (Cheng, 2003). In this

literature review, the term "effect" is used to imply the outcomes of assessment on Students' learning, teachers' teaching, and curriculum designers.

Among researchers who mentioned the washback effect, are Alderson and Wall (1993) who mentioned teachers and learners select some special learning and teaching procedure for themselves because of a test that they would not necessarily follow if the test did not exist. In this regard, some hypotheses about the washback effect have developed. According to Alderson and Wall (1993), "a test will influence Students' learning, a test will influence what teachers teach and how teachers teach" (p. 120).

In line with Messick's statements, Bailey (1996) used the term washback to describe how a test could affect teachers' teaching methods and learners' learning processes. She created a fundamental model of washback in which she investigated test effects on test-takers. In addition, Bailey (1996) referred to her "washback to the learners" which produces effective information for the learners, and "washback to the program" which produces effective information for teachers, stakeholders, curriculum designers, and the whole educational system (p. 264).

Based on Shohamy, 1992a,b, washback is a term used to describe a relationship between testing and learning, particularly in the context of foreign language learning in schools. She also mentioned measurement-driven instruction, which occurs when external evaluations have an effect on the educational process, which is known as washback, and curriculum designers adjust teaching materials based on the test results.

Likewise, in another study by Bachman and Palmer (1996), they used the test impact concept in line with the washback concept to point out to test effects on language learners and their parents, teachers, curriculum designers, and society on a large scale. Besides this, they point out to washback based on two perspectives of micro and macro levels. Washback at the macro level refers to the test influence on teachers, administrators, curriculum designers, and society policymakers, and at the micro-level refers to the testing effect on the learners and classroom.

To summarize, the washback effects exist, and they frequently have negative or positive implications, as detailed in the following sections. Furthermore, investigating the relationship between assessment and washback may yield new insights into washback research.

The role of vocabulary in task-based language teaching and task-based language assessment

Vocabulary knowledge is one of the most important skills, which contributes to a better understanding of speaking, reading, listening, and writing (Milton, 2013). Receptive knowledge of the vocabulary helps the learners to comprehend a

word when encountering with during the listening and reading processes (Nation, 2019). In contrast, productive vocabulary knowledge helps the learner use the words during speaking and writing (Nation, 2019). Since TBLT and learning is an integration of these four skills, adequate knowledge of words plays an important role during task performances. To know about different vocabulary task types in TBLT and TBLA, there is a need to specify the distinction between Focus on Forms instruction (FonFs) which is substantial in traditional language teaching, and Focus on Form (FonF) which is substantial in task-based teaching (Laufer, 2006). In the former type, teachers just emphasize explicit grammar teaching, while in the latter type, which is a communicative approach; teachers encourage the language learners to emphasize target language features (Laufer, 2006). In this phase, the respective ability of the learners to recognize the word form and the productive ability to use the words cooperate in performing the different tasks during task-based learning.

While the significance of vocabulary task-based teaching is elaborated on in several articles, it has been mentioned in previous research that during FonFs, learners FonFs more than traditional teaching, so their vocabulary knowledge increased significantly (Laufer, 2006; Laufer and Girsai, 2008; File and Adams, 2010). On the other hand, some other previous research mentioned learners' vocabulary developed significantly because of performing vocabulary tasks in TBLT classes (De la Fuente, 2006; Sarani and Sahebi, 2012; Kamalian et al., 2017).

About the role of vocabulary in task-based vocabulary assessment, Bachman and Palmer (1996) distinguished between the two types of task-based and traditional vocabulary assessments. The focus of the former type is on assessing only one language knowledge area, while the focus of the latter type is on assessing multiple areas of language knowledge. In the former type, the vocabulary ability of the learners cannot be interpreted meaningfully, because it cannot represent the whole knowledge of the learner. However, by performing a task-based vocabulary assessment and utilizing various analytic scales, distinguishable ratings can be provided for different components of the learner's language ability. Task-based vocabulary assessment would also be beneficial for teachers, because they may know the issues they want to assess.

Furthermore, Bachman (2002) claims that TBAs may be utilized to establish expectations for performing the upcoming language use tasks beyond the assessment itself and in real-life communications. As previous research showed the effectiveness of task-based vocabulary teaching along with TBA, it is expected for the learners to see progress in their vocabulary knowledge and use the newly learned vocabularies effectively in real-life activities. In the next section, different international and Iranian studies were explored in TBLT and TBLA.

Methodology

The present critical literature review evaluated the previous recent research articles to find out the washback effect of TBA of vocabulary on EFL learners. To increase our understanding, using completely theoretical methods some research articles that were published during the recent 10 years in international and Iranian contexts were randomly analyzed and synthesized. The main keywords of the current paper, TBLT, TBLA, washback effect, and vocabulary learning, were employed to retrieve these research publications by relying on reliable search engines such as Google Scholar and Research Gate databases. To begin, some articles about the effects of TBLT and TBLA on learning various aspects of the English language were selected. Then in some other articles, the effectiveness of task-based vocabulary assessment and teaching compared to the traditional type of vocabulary assessment and teaching was explored. In the end, some articles about the washback effect of task-based language assessment (TBLA) and traditional language assessment were reviewed critically. The reason for this survey was to find out the importance of the positive or negative washback effect of vocabulary TBA on vocabulary learning of the learners to use as a foundation for future unique empirical research. By induction and deduction on the pedagogical behavior of instructors and students, all of the randomly selected articles supplied a meaningful result for this paper's research topic.

Empirical studies on task-based language teaching and assessment

In recent years, TBLT and assessment has received many researchers' attention worldwide while studying the effects of task-based pedagogy on learning and teaching a foreign language (Giraldo, 2020; Liu and Ren, 2021; Noroozi, 2021; Putri and Ratmanida, 2021). In this section, the importance of TBLT and assessment among international and then Iranian research articles were presented. The aim is to compare the outcomes of past international and Iranian empirical research outcomes to determine if they were favorable or negative. Given the favorable outcomes, we may encourage scholars to conduct additional empirical studies on TBLT and Assessment.

International studies

Using Tayeb et al. (2018), Sarigoz and Fişne (2019), Liu and Ren (2021), and Prianty et al. (2021), study results in which all of them explored the washback effect of TBA, the present paper aimed to provide further evidence on the washback effect of TBA of vocabulary on EFL learners. The study of Sarigoz and Fişne (2019) revealed by utilizing an integrated language testing program that included 10-unit assessment tasks, TBA significantly increased the level of language learning in the 4th

grade. The result of this study agreed with the results of [Prianty et al. \(2021\)](#), since considerable similarities existed between these two. In the second study, teachers' perceptions of TBLT, including TBA were explored and the results demonstrated teachers' positive attitudes toward the utilization of TBLT, even though most of them had little knowledge about TBLT and assessment. In the first study, [Sarigoz and Fişne \(2019\)](#) stated that both teachers and learners were satisfied with integrating TBLA into the classroom setting. The results of both studies confirmed the reality that traditional types of assessment fail to satisfy the students and teachers. In line with two previous study, [Liu and Ren \(2021\)](#) explored Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions of TBLT and assessed the current implementation of TBLT. The results showed teachers' positive views about the TBLT methodology. All three studies were similar in the point that while the participants had little knowledge about TBLT, they were willing to participate in TBLT classes.

The same results were observed in two other studies by [Okcu \(2015\)](#) and [Tayeb et al. \(2018\)](#). The former study explored the dominant washback effect of the general secondary English examination on Yemeni teachers was explored. The results revealed a positive effect on teachers' teaching methods and attitudes. In this study, the attitudes of the students toward TBLT and TBLA were not observed, while the results showed an improvement in the scores of the students. In contrast, in the latter study, the effects of TBI on reading comprehension and new vocabulary learning on EFL learners were explored and the attitudes of the teachers were not considered. The findings revealed improvement of the EFL learners through TBLT instruction that TBI has a positive effect on vocabulary learning and they were satisfied with this assessment method.

In conclusion, the critical review of the previous articles showed that significant attention has been paid to Students' vocabulary knowledge using TBLT and TBLA during the process of EFL instruction, and the focuses were more on effective factors that led to the enhancement of participants' language learning. According to the results of previous studies which showed the effectiveness of TBA and teaching, using task-based vocabulary teaching and assessment in Iranian schools will provide favorable outcomes on Iranian EFL Learners.

Iranian studies

By exploring [Safa and Goodarzi \(2014\)](#), [Kafipour et al. \(2018\)](#), [Elahi and Mashhadi Heidar \(2021\)](#), and [Saedi \(2021\)](#), study results in which all of them have a portion in exploring the washback effect of TBA, the present paper aimed to provide further evidence on the washback effect of TBA of vocabulary on EFL learners. This investigation is done to see if TBLT and TBLA are applicable in an Iranian context.

Firstly, some research studies explored the effect of TBLT and TBLA on the vocabulary learning of the students. According to the study of [Sarani and Sahebi \(2012\)](#), which explored two different groups, task-based vocabulary teaching

in the experimental group was more effective than traditional vocabulary teaching in the control group. This means that the performance of the experimental group in the post-test was better than the control group. Based on the results of this study and similar studies with the same result, we can conclude a shift from traditional teaching and assessment to the TBLT and TBLA method, which entitles a change in the English language curriculum of Iranian schools. In line with the previous article, [Fasih et al. \(2018\)](#) investigated the effect of mnemonic vocabulary teaching and assessment on vocabulary learning of the students in two groups. The first group received traditional vocabulary method and the second group received a task-based keyword method of teaching and assessment. The results of the post-test showed a higher gain in the performance of the second group. We can conclude that in TBLT, the keyword technique may result in a significant enhancement of vocabulary learning, and this strategy can be used to modify the English teaching materials and curriculum in Iranian schools.

Furthermore, [Khoshshima and Saed \(2016\)](#) stressed the benefits of task-based vocabulary teaching and testing over traditional methods. The differences between the two involved groups in this study were using jigsaw and information-gap tasks for the experimental group, and the control group received traditional normal vocabulary teaching and testing method. The pedagogical implication of this study is that by engaging learners in problem-solving activities while teachers use authentic materials, they can acquire more vocabulary. However, problem-solving activities need more time than is often allocated to English language instruction in Iranian schools.

Secondly, various research studies have looked at the effects of TBLT and TBLA on Students' listening, writing, speaking, reading, grammar, etc. The study of [Elahi and Mashhadi Heidar \(2021\)](#) explored the effects of task-based language learning and integrating blended learning on the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. To this end, they used Ellis' (2017) task-based teaching method, and the results showed the efficiency of task-based teaching methods on participants of the experimental group in contrast to conventional strategies in the control groups. Despite showing the good effect of TBLT along with TBLA in this study, the number of students was not enough for generalizing the idea. In addition, there is no evidence to what extent this method helped the learners to learn new vocabulary. Moreover, there is a need for exploring teachers' attitudes to have more accurate results. This issue is not also considered in the study by [Kafipour et al. \(2018\)](#). In their research, they just investigated the effect of Task-Based Instruction (TBI) on the development of grammar proficiency of EFL Learners. The participants in experimental groups were involved in TBI using different tasks, while the control group benefited from the traditional method. The results of the post-test indicated the high efficiency of the task-based teaching method in promoting the grammar proficiency of EFL learners

in contrast to the traditional method. The results of this study are very beneficial, while there is no trace of teachers' and Students' attitudes, to see if they are willing to confront this method of teaching in the future or not. Moreover, they just considered grammar, the only parameter which is also considered in the next study by [Safa and Goodarzi \(2014\)](#), the washback effect of TBLA was explored on the grammatical development of EFL learners. The results revealed a positive washback effect of the task-based tests on the grammatical development of EFL learners. Once again, they didn't consider vocabulary learning during TBLT and TBLA.

Based on some of the previous research about the implementation of task-based activities and tests, the efficiency of these methods was revealed. For example, in a study by [Saeedi \(2021\)](#), the results showed the positive effect of task-based online planning on EFL learners' performance. In the other research by [Ostad et al. \(2018\)](#), the efficiency of task-based listening activities in improving the listening comprehension of Iranian IELTS candidates was explored, and the results revealed that the task-based group had outperformed the traditional group.

In conclusion, the critical review of the previous articles showed the effectiveness of TBLT and TBLA during the process of EFL instruction. Firstly, some findings of past studies directly demonstrated the effectiveness of task-based vocabulary teaching and assessment over the traditional vocabulary teaching and assessment methods in Iran. According to the findings of the other research studies in Iran, TBLA as an alternative method can be replaced by the traditional assessment procedures because the evidence showed that they could maximize educational gains and developments in different fields of listening, writing, speaking, reading, grammar, etc. It can be concluded that by enhancing these abilities, the vocabulary knowledge of the learners will be also enhanced, so TBLA will be effective for vocabulary learning.

Empirical background of the washback effect

In recent years, washback has received many researchers' attention worldwide while studying the effects of assessment and testing on learning and teaching a foreign language ([Okcu, 2015](#); [Reynolds et al., 2018](#); [Tayeb et al., 2018](#); [Rahman et al., 2021](#)). In this section, the importance of the washback effect among international researchers and then Iranian researchers were presented.

International studies

The concept of washback of the classroom assessment was taken into consideration by many researchers worldwide. [Pitoyo et al. \(2020\)](#) explored the washback effect of quizzes on Students' learning. To collect the data, the researcher used a questionnaire, observation, and in-depth interview and analyzed qualitatively.

The result of the study shows that students were motivated and wanted to learn more after doing integrated gamified tests with quizzes. As it was stated by previous writers, the positive washback of a test can bring about benefits and encourage students to change their study methods ([Pearson, 1988](#)). The participants were interested in quizzes by using the idea of gamification because it was engaging, and they prefer to do the computer-based test ([Clariana and Wallace, 2002](#)).

In line with the previous articles, [Kutlu et al. \(2020\)](#) explored the attitudes of university candidates toward foreign language tests by utilizing open-ended questionnaires and content analysis techniques. The first questionnaire gathered information about the participants' general ideas during their participation in the foreign language test. Then, the other questionnaire was conducted to gather information about the factors affecting the participants' attitudes toward foreign language tests. The results showed that participants have a negative wash effect on the foreign language test which led to the negative attitudes of the participants. As a result, foreign language tests and the content materials, style and reliability, and validity of the examination should be improved.

[Lutfiana et al. \(2020\)](#), in their study investigated the teaching and learning of English through online classes and the washback effect of online testing during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results have indicated the effectiveness of WhatsApp groups, as the e-learning platform, for online teaching and learning. The positive washback effect motivated students to prepare more effectively for the following test, and their honesty was put to the test. The negative washback effect of the test was related to the time limit of the test, which caused the students to feel anxious. In addition, the students were not as concentrated and focused at home, as they were in a real classroom area. In the end, they could not achieve the desired score. The positive washback effect on the teacher was related to their improved ability to control the media during online instruction and prepare test items.

According to a critical analysis of previous research publications, numerous studies have been conducted on the washback effect of classroom assessment, with the majority of them leading to improvements in participant knowledge, syllabus design, and instructors' teaching effectiveness. Implementing this strategy in Iranian classrooms will provide beneficial results in the quality of learning and teaching process of the students and teachers.

Iranian studies

In recent years, researchers have studied washback from different aspects in Iran. In a study by [Jamalifar et al. \(2021\)](#), the authors attempted to explore the washback effect of the English Proficiency Test (EPT) on the learners. They used an attitude questionnaire to gather data from 200 participants. The collected data showed both positive and negative washback impacts of the test on learning materials. A negative washback effect led to narrowing down the curriculum and measuring

Iranian Ph.D. candidates' proficiency based on grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. In terms of the positive washback effect, the result showed the effectiveness of the syllabus but the levels of the textbooks needed to be improved to be aligned with the content.

In another similar study by [Razavipour et al. \(2020\)](#), the authors attempted to explore how test takers' motivation and perceptions of test uses and design are related to their test preparation practices. The authors used two questionnaires, and the results showed the effectiveness of the syllabus but the levels of the textbooks need to be improved to be aligned with the content.

Furthermore, [Pakzad and Salehi \(2018\)](#) explored the washback effect of the university entrance exam on Iranian MA Teaching English as a foreign language and how the lecturers' classroom activities would be affected by this exam. The results of the quantitative and qualitative data including a reliable researcher-made questionnaire showed that the washback effect of the entrance exam did not significantly change the lecturers' classroom activities and their teaching methodology.

From another perspective, [Damankesh and Babaii \(2015\)](#) examined high school Students' test-taking and test preparation that can be affected because of final examinations which typically include sections on vocabulary, grammar, and language function. The final exams were handed to the students in the first stage. Next, the students were asked to mention their feeling about the final test through the think-aloud protocol. The analysis of think-aloud protocols revealed a negative washback effect on the final exam of the students.

As it is evident, many studies have been done about the washback effect of classroom assessment that may lead to the enhancement of participants' knowledge, syllabus design, and teachers' teaching performance. Furthermore, what we can conclude is that, while measuring the washback effect of classroom assessment, we should specifically pay attention to the vocabulary knowledge of the learners. Since, in the previous studies, Students' different parts of knowledge consisting of grammar, reading, writing, or listening were enhanced, we can conclude that Students' vocabulary as the main part of foreign language learning was enhanced too. As a result, if task-based vocabulary teaching and assessment are used in future research articles, Students' vocabulary knowledge will improve.

The empirical studies about vocabulary assessment in international and Iranian contexts

There is always a question of whether traditional or differentiated types of assessment are the right way of assessing language learners. In recent years, TBLT and assessment has received many researchers' attention worldwide while studying the effects of task-based pedagogy on learning and teaching a

foreign language ([Giraldo, 2020](#); [Liu and Ren, 2021](#); [Noroozi, 2021](#); [Putri and Ratmanida, 2021](#)). In this section, the role of vocabulary in TBLT and TBLA among international researchers and then Iranian researchers were presented.

[Wu \(2018\)](#) conducted a study to investigate the effect of TBLA on language learners' vocabulary learning by utilizing 15 vocabularies. He divided the participants into 2 groups. The first group did not receive any instruction and the vocabularies. In contrast, the researcher provided the 15 vocabularies with proper instruction for the second group. Then by providing the same writing task for both groups, the participants of the first group were allowed to use any strategy to find the meaning of the unknown words. Both groups were asked to make a sentence for five words. The results showed that the first group outperformed the second one in productive vocabulary knowledge.

Another similar result was observed by [Shintani \(2012\)](#). The research result showed that the group, which performed input-based tasks such as, listening and doing tasks, were more successful than the control group, and the tasks resulted in natural communication which improved their vocabulary knowledge.

The next study by [Nychkalo et al. \(2020\)](#) identified the effectiveness of the task-based approach to teaching business vocabulary. In this study, the researchers used different task types for the experimental group during TBI and assessed the students multiple times with aim of solving real business problems, which developed their teamwork and communication skills in a real-life situation. While in the control group, traditional vocabulary teaching and assessment were used for the learners. The results showed that the task-based group outperformed the control group in productive vocabulary knowledge. The results of the previous study is in line with the results of the study by [Fasih et al. \(2018\)](#). In TBLT and TBLA, keyword mnemonic assessment as one of the task-based techniques may result in enhancement in the vocabulary knowledge of the students.

Similarly, [Touti and Maleki \(2016\)](#) explored the differences between writing and fill-in-the-blank assessments in incidental vocabulary retention. The participants were divided into two groups and the findings favored the group which performed writing tasks, because of the remarkably outstanding cognitive load imposed by such a TBA.

Likewise, the same result can be seen in the article of [Kamalian et al. \(2017\)](#). In this study, a comparison between two groups using task-based reading vs. conventional reading activities showed that after performing and completing the texts and the questions, which were made by the students, task-based reading activities had a significant effect on learners' vocabulary learning.

Although many studies have attempted to assess various components of vocabulary knowledge, most of the studies showed that the students who presented with focused vocabulary TBAs were more successful than those who

were presented with a traditional assessment. The results of the previous Iranian studies showed the positive washback effect of task-based teaching and assessment on vocabulary learning of the students. Studies have revealed that this strategy has the potential to improve the educational system and, in particular, Students' vocabulary development in the future.

Conclusion and implication

The present literature review explored the washback effect of task-based vocabulary assessment on EFL Learners. To answer the research question of this paper, the results of previous international and Iranian articles were critically reviewed, analyzed, and compared. Based on international and Iranian research findings, we may infer that TBLT and assessment are beneficial to language learners. In most of the cases, Students' main English skills were enhanced significantly, which shows the positive washback effect of TBLA. Based on Milton (2013), since vocabulary knowledge is one of the most significant abilities that lead to a better comprehension of speaking, reading, listening, and writing, we can conclude that TBA has a positive effect on EFL learners' vocabulary learning. Among previous international and Iranian studies, there were some studies that directly explored the washback effect of task-based vocabulary assessment on EFL learners. The only factor that most of the studies did not pay enough attention to was Students' and teachers' attitudes toward TBA. Furthermore, there were few research studies that included teachers' and Students' attitudes, but it is advised that future studies cover them more. The implications suggested that Iranian Students' vocabulary learning could be enhanced with regard to task-based vocabulary assessment, since the prevalent traditional assessment method fails in most cases. Teachers' vocabulary teaching may be also positively affected by TBLA, since this method motivated the students to work in groups or pairs. Likewise, curriculum designers could benefit from task-based vocabulary assessment and change the content of teaching in a way that it can fit into TBLT and assessment methods. Moreover, stakeholders may organize some training courses for Iranian

teachers, which will help them with task-based vocabulary teaching and classroom assessment in the future. The possible result of the study is related to using TBAs in meaningful contexts that expand the learners' mental representation to utilize vocabularies properly. Students also will gain benefit from TBLT and TBLA in their learning process as they will recognize their difficulty in using language in authentic life tasks and it will be effective in promoting Students' vocabulary.

In conclusion, the current theoretical literature review aided in determining what theories about the washback effect of TBA currently exist, their linkages, the extent to which existing ideas have been studied. Finally, it will encourage Iranian scholars to do new empirical studies that are dependent on the collected data or observations, which can contribute to enhancing the Iranian literature on the washback effect of TBA and the TBLT teaching context.

Author contributions

The author confirms being the sole contributor of this work and has approved it for publication.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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